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The stranger took a sip of coffee. “No. I don’t know what you mean.”

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High Plains Drifter

Ernest Tidyman

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HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER

Chapter I

He was a tall man on a tired horse and he rode into Lago at the tag end of a burning day. The sun that had turned the sky to brass was inching behind the distant peaks of the Dragoon Range, but the heat remained. It sent shimmering curtains of haze dancing across the broad valley, distorting plumes of red dust and causing the foothills to float on the horizon like masses of dun-colored cloud.

It was the Reverend Matthew Bass, standing in front of his white painted clapboard church, who first saw the stranger. He was discussing the church fund with Mrs. Rhoda Hobart—a fund that was still several hundred dollars short of its goal, that of providing the empty steeple with a bell.

"Not an ordinary bell, Mrs. Hobart," the reverend intoned. "We need one of special quality, one that will do justice to the only house of God within two hundred heathen miles."

Mrs. Hobart listened patiently. She had heard the same speech many times, but she knew her husband a good deal better than the reverend did and she knew to the penny the limit of his generosity.

"Jason's pledged twenty dollars, Reverend," she said quietly. "I couldn't ask him to donate more."

The reverend cast his eyes toward heaven. Twenty dollars! The insignificance of the sum was shocking.

"A bronze bell, Mrs. Hobart, deep throated, hanging up there in the belfry, calling to the God-fearing every Sunday morning—ringing out the hours. Such a bell would lend dignity to the town. The sound of it would make us all proud. And none more so than those worthy citizens whose generosity …"

"Twenty dollars is all," Mrs. Hobart interrupted bleakly. "Things have been a mite slow at the store, Jason says."

Now that was an outright lie and the reverend knew it Jason Hobart was making money hand over fist. A man couldn't buy a button to put on his shirt unless he purchased it at the Emporium. He didn't like to shame people into making donations, but there were times when the ends did justify the means. He lowered his eyes from the molten sky and impaled Mrs. Hobart with a frosty stare.

"Now, Mrs. Hobart …" he began firmly, but it was then that he saw the rider and his words caught in his throat. Mrs. Hobart could see the look of sudden fear in the reverend's pale eyes and she turned her

head sharply to follow his gaze.

"Who … who is it?" Her tone was hollow.

The man was still a distance away and the upper portion of his face was obscured by the shadow of his hat brim, but he was alone. There were no other riders trailing along in his dust.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Hobart. It's just a stranger."

Mrs. Hobart scurried off without a sound. The Reverend Bass continued to stand in front of the church, shielding his eyes against the sun as he watched the rider enter town. A stranger without question, the reverend mused. But what brought him to Lago? The town marked the end of the road. There was nothing beyond it but wasteland and the mountains. Few men came to Lago unless they had something to sell, or sought work in the silver mines. The stranger was no drummer, and he didn't appear to be a miner. Miners came to town on foot or clinging to their mules. The stranger was a horseman, sitting gun-straight in the saddle as though riding to distant bugles.

The reverend raised his hand in greeting as the rider came abreast of him, but if the man saw the gesture he didn't acknowledge it. He walked his lathered horse toward the center of town, eyes straight ahead, glancing neither left nor right.

Caleb Bowen's undertaking establishment was conveniently located up the street from the church. An ornate black hearse with flower holders on all corners of its high sides stood expectantly in front of it. The hearse had come all the way from St. Louis, Missouri, and it was Caleb's pride and joy. He was polishing the back of it with an oiled rag when he saw the stranger reflected in the gloss. The sight made his mouth turn dry and his breath catch. He turned, startled, but the stranger ignored him and rode on by. Caleb Bowen removed his tall silk hat and wiped a dew of sweat from his pale forehead.

"Who the hell was that?" he bleated.

Asa Goodwin, who was washing the varnished seat on top of the hearse, peered after the rider like a startled gnome. "Ain't never seen him before, Mister Bowen. But that was a mighty fine horse. Yes, sir. That was a pure black Morgan."

Caleb Bowen swore under his breath. It was just like that fool Asa to pay more attention to the horse than to the man. Only two things Asa knew how to do and those were to dig graves and shovel horseshit. Caleb went back to his polishing but his heart was no longer in the task. He felt a sense of foreboding, a heaviness on his chest.

"Just the heat," he muttered sourly. But he knew it was more than that. The sight of the stranger had unnerved him but he couldn't have explained why.

Bill Borders lounged against the hitching rail in front of the Silver Dollar Saloon, his thick fingers jammed into the front of his gunbelt and his long legs spread far apart. It was an arrogant pose designed to show off his well cut pants, hand tooled boots, and the big nickel-plated Colt Frontier that he wore high on his waist in the style of John Wesley Hardin. The Colt rested in a quick-draw holster lined with chamois and Bill Borders could draw it faster than the flick of a snake's tongue. It was the only thing that he could do well. He spat in the dust and looked up the street toward the hotel hoping to catch a glimpse of Sarah Belding. She usually came out about this time in the afternoon to do her marketing, without even a bonnet on her thick, silky brown hair. It was fun walking up to her and offering to help carry her basket. She'd get all flustered and keep looking over her shoulder to see if her husband was looking. Old Henry Belding watched her like a hawk, but he didn't have the guts to tell Bill Borders what to do. A man that old shouldn't have such a young, pretty wife. One day he'd grab hold of Sarah Belding and kiss her right there in the middle of the street and dare old Henry to do anything about it. The thought made him grin.

"Hell," he said aloud. "The bastard'd soak his britches, that's what."

Two young men sat on the edge of the wooden sidewalk behind the hitching rail. Their names were Tommy Morris and Fred Short and they trailed after Bill Borders like a couple of ragged strays, living in his shadow, bathing in his sun.

"Who'd soak his britches, Bill?" Tommy Morris asked.

"Nobody," Borders snapped. "I was thinkin' is all."

Tommy Morris grunted and went back to picking his teeth with a sliver of wood. Fred Short stabbed moodily at the worn planking of the sidewalk with a knife until he grew tired of it and then slipped the eight-inch bowie into a deerskin sheath strapped to the lower part of his right leg. To keep his hands busy, he tugged a venerable Walker Colt from his belt and twirled the cylinder with his thumb.

"Let's go in an' drink some beer," he muttered.

"Later," Borders said. He was reluctant to leave in case Sarah Belding came out of the hotel. He pulled his hat lower over his eyes and stared fixedly up the road. No activity in front of the hotel. Hardly anyone moving at all in the afternoon heat. A couple of mule skinners standing in front of the Drake-Allen Mining Company office, and Johnny Wade unloading a wagon of baled hay at the livery stable. Outside of them—nothing. A dust devil spiraled across the road and Bill Borders shut his eyes against the wind-driven grit. When he opened them Callie Travers was coming down the walk from the direction of the mining company office. The sight of her made Borders

move away from the hitching rail. He stepped over the sprawled legs of his two friends and leaned casually beside the swinging doors of the saloon. He eyed Callie boldly as she came toward him, taking in every movement of her swinging hips and the jiggle of her full breasts.

"Heifer on the hoof," he said with a smirk. Tommy Morris and Fred Short laughed, but the sound was strained. Callie Travers was a woman who sent every man who saw her into the dark places of his head for the fantasy of rolling naked with a whore. She knew the effect she had on the male population and she did nothing to discourage it. She wore her dresses tight across the hip and low in the bodice, and let her long blonde hair hang free so that it swirled in golden waves across her bare shoulders.

"Buy you a whiskey, Callie." Borders stepped in front of her, blocking her way. His small, pale eyes flicked hungrily at the fleshy crevice between her breasts.

She laughed in his face. "I don't drink with boys."

Borders flushed scarlet with anger and humiliation. The bitch! Always teasing him, tossing her body in his face, then pulling back the bait. His hands clenched, driving the blood from his knuckles. He wanted to smash her against the wall and change her smile into a scream of pain. The smile was infuriating. It was brazen, lewd—the smile of a woman begging for a man to take her. She was taunting him with that smile, and then he realized with a shock that she wasn't even looking at him.

He turned his head sharply to see the stranger riding slowly up the street toward the livery stable across the way. Callie Travers was following him with her eyes, her full, moist lips half parted.

"What are you lookin' at him for?" When Bill Borders was angry his voice rose, high-pitched and tremulous, the voice of a boy.

She was very honest, "I like the way the man rides."

She flounced past him before he could think of anything to say. He glanced quickly at Morris and Short, daring either one of them to so much as grin, then stared at the stranger. He was so angry he could taste the brine of tears and swallowed.

He had seen people watching him as he rode up the street and had sensed their fear and suspicion. They had stood tense and silent in the shadows of the buildings or peered furtively at him through dusty windows. He could have relieved their tension by tipping his hat and calling out a greeting, but he had chosen to ignore them. When he reached the livery stable he reined his horse and sat for a moment, just looking around, squinting in the sun. Lago. Only the name made it a different place from all the other towns he had been in. One long

street lined with wooden buildings, a three-story hotel with a porticoed front, a church. A town like any other, sunbaked and desolate.

A pall of dust obscured the north end of the street as a team of twenty mules hauled an ore wagon into town, a pack of lean dogs yapping at the mules. The teamster leaned forward in his high seat and sent his whip snaking at the dogs. One of them broke out of the pack yelping in pain. The teamster struck again, the whip snapping in the dry air like the crack of a pistol. The stranger winced and looked away.

"Take care of your horse, mister?"

"What?" The stranger was startled and swung his body to one side. A tall, rawboned boy was walking toward him from the livery stable wiping the sweat from his face with a rag. There was a look in the stranger's eyes that made the boy hesitate.

"Your horse …" the boy stammered. "Dollar a day … stall an' feed."

The stranger thought it over for a moment.

"Don't let him drink too much. We've had a long, hot ride and I don't want him sick."

"No, sir," the boy said. "I'll sure see to it."

The man swung stiffly out of the saddle, handed the reins to the boy and walked slowly across the street toward the Silver Dollar Saloon.

Joe Hatch folded his heavy arms and glared down at the checkerboard. It didn't look like he was in any kind of trouble, yet Mordecai was grinning to himself, and Billy Flint who was peering over the dwarf's shoulder was grinning too.

"You going to move, Joe, or just look at the board all day?"

Joe Hatch raised his eyes and tried to read the expression in the dwarf's face. Joe Hatch had great respect for Mordecai Fortune as a checker player but he wouldn't have said much for him in a game of poker. Mordecai had a face that revealed too much. Right now he looked like a cat full of stolen cream. He was doing his best to suppress a grin and the effort was causing him to rock back and forth. He was sitting on the bar, bunchy little legs crossed like an Indian, and he might have fallen off if Billy Flint had not placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You got me," Hatch said under his breath, "only I don't see it."

"Move and you'll see it," Mordecai squeaked. "Just you move a piece, Joe."

Joe Hatch hesitated, circling the board with his finger. He spotted a safe move and quickly jumped one of Mordecai's checkers and

crowned his own. He sighed with relief and took a swig of beer. Mordecai giggled and shoved a piece from his back row in front of Hatch's new king.

"Jump me!"

Hatch glared at the board. It had been so obvious and yet he'd failed to see it.

"I don't want to jump you," he grunted.

"You gotta!" the dwarf shrieked in delight. "You gotta!"

He jumped the piece and Mordecai cleared the board. The howl of Mordecai Fortune's laughter greeted the stranger as he came through the swinging doors into the dim coolness of the saloon. The man scanned the room before walking slowly over to the bar. In the brief time he had stood by the door he had spotted every man in the place —the group of dust-stained teamsters at a corner table, drinking beer and talking; the dwarf seated cross-legged on top of the bar; the lean, graying cowboy standing next to him and the big bartender with a belly as round as the barrels stacked behind his counter.

"What'll it be, friend?" Joe Hatch ambled down the bar, glad to be moving away from Mordecai's triumph and his own shame. A fool's play. Mordecai had set him up and he'd walked right into it with his eyes open. Picking up a damp rag he wiped the top of the bar with it.

"I got some good beer and some fair whiskey."

"Beer," the stranger said. "And then a bottle of whatever you're selling."

Hatch grinned. "It won't blind you, but it'll scald the gut a little."

The man nodded.

Hatch moved to the center of the bar to pump the beer. He took his time about it. He wanted to look the stranger over, size him up. Joe Hatch had been tending bar all his life and he considered himself a master at judging men. What he saw standing in front of his bar was more leather than flesh—a six-foot stretch of rawhide. A cowboy judging by his clothes. A range wanderer, like Billy Flint. They drifted in from time to time, driving strays from the high country to sell to Lago's butchers.

"You bring in some cows?" Hatch asked, flicking an inch of foam from the top of the glass.

"No," the stranger said.

"Prices are high," Hatch said. "A man can make some good money with a few head."

"That a fact?" There was not the slightest trace of interest in the man's voice.

Hatch set the beer in front of him and decided to abandon his

attempt at conversation. The stranger drank the beer in one pull and set down the empty glass with great care.

"That cut the dust." He fished for a coin but Hatch shook his head.

"The first one's on me."

"For the whiskey, then." He placed a silver dollar on the bar.

No, not a cowboy, Hatch thought as he turned to get a bottle of whiskey and a clean glass from the shelf behind him. Cowboys had a faraway look in their eyes as though they were always dreaming about what was over the next hill. This man's eyes were cold and pitiless as a hawk's. A cowboy would have lounged against the bar and been eager as punch for a little conversation, while this man stayed aloof. Despite the shabbiness of his clothes he looked competent and professional with a Colt .45 tied low on his right thigh in a well-worn holster. A man with a lonely profession perhaps, but trailing cattle wasn't it.

"Anything else you want?" Hatch asked, handing over the bottle and glass.

The stranger shook his head. "Just a quiet hour to get this down."

"Take any table you want, mister. Nobody'll bother you."

Hatch waited until the man had walked across the room to the table by the front window before picking up the dollar and slipping it into his pocket. Then he moved back down the bar. Mordecai had paid no attention, his small, twisted body hunched over the checkerboard as he set up the pieces for another game. But Billy Flint had curiosity written all over his face.

"I think I might know that fella," Flint said.

Hatch shook his head dourly. "You don't know him, Billy."

"Think I might." Flint finished the dregs of his beer and wiped flecks of foam from his drooping mustache. "Looks just like a fella I used to drink with in Abilene … or maybe Topeka. Anyway, think I'll mosey over seein' as how he's got a full bottle an' all."

Hatch placed a big hand on the old cowboy's arm. "I wouldn't do that if I was you. I got me a feeling he likes to drink alone."

He glanced toward the front table. The stranger was pouring a glass of whiskey and staring moodily at the bottle. The dying sun caught the top panes of the fly-specked window and bathed the stranger in a reddish glow. Red as the dust of Lago. Red as blood.

Chapter II

Bill Borders stared at the setting sun like a lizard, unblinking, unseeing. Anger blinded him and he struggled to control his rage before doing anything. Morris and Short stood beside him, waiting for him to make his move, but he wasn't going to be rushed. Callie Travers was watching him too. He knew she was just down the walk, pretending to look at the merchandise in old man Hobart's window. The bitch. Standing there, smiling to herself. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. Stacey had always told him to do that. Close the eyes and suck air. Calmed a man down. Made him think straight.

"The sonofabitch," he muttered.

The stranger had walked into the Silver Dollar like he owned the town. Just walked right past Bill Borders without even looking at him.

Joe Hatch sensed trouble the moment Borders pushed open the doors and stepped inside the room. He didn't like the way Borders was looking at the stranger, and he didn't like the way Fred Short and Tommy Morris moved in beside him. The three of them were too quiet and tense. Usually they came into the saloon whooping and hollering and slapping the counter for service. He moved quickly down the bar, forcing a broad, welcoming smile.

"Afternoon, boys. What'll it be?"

"Nothing," Borders said quietly, not looking at him. "This place smells of horse sweat."

The bartender's voice was calm. "Now, Bill, that ain't no way to talk. Step on over an' I'll buy you a drink."

Borders ignored the offer. He took a step toward the table where the stranger was seated.

"Flea-bitten range bums don't usually stop in Lago."

The stranger raised his eyes from the table. He took in Bill Borders with one contemptuous glance and returned to his quiet drinking, a full glass of whiskey in his right hand, left hand on the table, palm down.

"Maybe you didn't hear me, cowboy," Borders shouted.

"I heard you," the stranger said. He took a sip of whiskey.

"Range bums ride in and ride out. Life's a little too fast for 'em here."

"Is that a fact?" The stranger finished his whiskey and poured himself another.

Borders took a deep breath. He was pushing the man but nothing was happening. The man's hand was as far away from his gun as it was possible to be. He shot a quick glance around the room. The teamsters were staring at him, bug-eyed and expectant, all set to dive under the table. Joe Hatch had stopped breathing, Mordecai was grinning like a fool and Billy Flint had his back to the bar, stiff as a post. There wasn't a man in the room who wasn't waiting for something to happen—except the stranger.

Borders moved his right hand with glacial slowness until it was coiled like a spring above the handle of his gun. "I'm talking to you, mister, but you ain't listening. Now you put down that goddamn whiskey and pay attention to what I say."

The stranger held his glass up to the fading light and squinted at it.

"You said life was too fast here."

"It's too fast for a mangy bum!"

The stranger set his glass on the table and turned it between two fingers. When he spoke his voice was a sigh.

"Everywhere I go. People like you."

"Then maybe you ain't goin' anywhere after here, mister. Maybe this is the end of the road."

The stranger's arrogant calm was like a slap in the face. Borders shifted his feet, going into a half crouch, just the way John Wesley Hardin of Texas was known to draw. His right hand slapped hard against the ivory handle of his Colt, trigger finger curling through the guard, thumb square on the hammer, drawing … drawing …

BLAM

Flame stabbed from under the stranger's left hand. The sound of the palmed derringer blended with the scream of Bill Borders as the heavy slug smashed into his face. He fell backward, spinning on his boot heels, spraying blood.

Fred Short tugged the big Walker Colt from his belt and leveled it at the table, but the stranger was no longer seated there. He was on his feet with a six-gun in his right hand, a gun with no trigger, the flat palm of his left hand poised over the hammer. A fanner, Short thought wildly. It was the last thought he would ever have. The stranger's hand blurred and the gun jumped. Fred Short jerked backward with four bullets in his chest and slumped against the corner of the bar like a bundle of bloody rags.

Tommy Morris tried to scream his defiance but no sound emerged from his open mouth. He managed to clear his gun just as two slugs hammered him down. He died on his knees, staring stupidly at the floor, wondering where all the blood was coming from.

It was silent in the room after the final echo of the shots. Smoke drifted in flat, greasy wisps, covering the three bodies with a hazy shroud.

"Great God Almighty," Joe Hatch whispered.

Mordecai Fortune began to laugh, a high-pitched giggle that grew in intensity.

"What'll you have, boys?" he shrieked, his tiny, twisted body rocking from side to side. "Mordecai buys! Mordecai buys!"

His screaming cackle cut through the room like a whirling blade. Joe Hatch shuddered at the sound and reached for a bottle of whiskey. The teamsters at the corner table sat like men of stone and Billy Flint tugged nervously at his mustache.

The stranger calmly reloaded his weapons without once glancing at the men on the floor. They were dead and that was the end of it. They were dead because they had made a foolish play. He felt only contempt for them as he pushed the empty brass casings from his six-gun and slipped in new shells. The empties tinkled as they hit the floor, sounding like coins falling from his hand.

"It weren't your fault," Joe Hatch said thickly. "I seen it. They tried to th'ow down on you. Nobody even called for a draw."

The stranger said nothing. He slid the Colt back in its holster, pocketed the derringer that lay on the table, picked up the bottle of whiskey, and walked out of the saloon without looking at anybody. Mordecai Fortune continued to laugh but it was a waning sound, trailing into a terrible silence.

The last rays of the sun touched the buildings, giving the raw wood a soft glow, like mellowed stone. Part of the street was in deep shadow and lanterns were burning in a few windows casting squares of yellow light on the ground. The stranger stood outside the saloon and took a long pull from his bottle. He had the bottle to his lips when Callie Travers walked out of the shadows and bumped into him.

"Sorry," she murmured, her eyes bright, challenging. The stranger wiped spilled whiskey from his chin and stared at her. A good-looking woman. Milky flesh curving over the top of her bodice. Provocative hips. A brazen strumpet waiting expectantly.

She smiled archly. "Well?"

He looked away from her, tilting the bottle back to his lips, letting the whiskey flow into him, raw and burning. His indifference was palpable and it stung Callie Travers like open fingers snapped on bare flesh.

"A drunkard," she hissed, backing away from him. "I thought you

were a man when I saw you ride in."

He bowed slightly from the waist and raised the bottle in a mock salute. "To your big mouth, ma'am. Equaled only by the size of your—ah—feet."

She cursed him and stepped in kicking, hitching up her skirt to give herself more room.

"BASTARD!"

Her small, sharp-toed shoes drummed off the man's shinbone. He sidestepped the fusillade of kicks and grabbed her around the waist, the bottle clutched in his right hand like a short club.

"You need a lesson, lady," he said harshly. "A lesson in manners."

"You won't teach it!" She spat the words in his face and fought him like a cat, clawing and scratching. But he was too strong, stronger than any man she had known. The arm about her waist closed like steel and squeezed the breath out of her body. She was limp and unresisting when he dragged her off the walk and across the street toward the dark shadows of the livery stable.

It was hot under the low, slanting roof of the stable and the still air was pungent with the smell of horses, manure, and hay. The stranger hauled Callie Travers into an empty stall the way a man might lug a sack of meal into a storeroom. The stall was knee-deep in fresh straw and he dropped her onto it then straddled her. She raised a knee and tried to jab him in the groin.

"Go ahead and fight," he whispered. "I don't give a damn."

She thrust stiff fingers at his face, jabbing for the eyes. "I'll kill you," she sobbed.

He reared back and she nearly squirmed out from under him. Dropping the bottle he used both hands to take hold of her wrists and jerk her arms back. The fight went out of her and she lay sullenly beneath him, breathing hard.

"I swear it. I'll see you dead!"

"Maybe," he said harshly. "But not now. Not tonight."

He clasped her wrists easily with one hand and reached down with his other—tugging at his gunbelt and the tight constriction of his clothes.

A horse whinnied in the darkness and kicked at the rough boards of his stall. Young Johnny Wade heard it as he came out of the tack room at the rear of the stables. He was a boy who knew horses better than anyone in the territory, even Asa Goodwin. He could tell by the sound that it was the stranger's black Morgan. The stallion was fretting. It was feeling its oats—or lack of them. Well, hell fire, he'd fed the animal. Curried it too, wiped the sweat foam off with a cloth and

brushed him down. He'd watered him proper and given him a good feed, but he was carrying on like a wild thing.

"Hold it, boy … take it easy." He filled a bucket with oats and walked down the passageway between the stalk. The horse had been ridden a long way. Nothing between Fort Bower and Lago but dry trail and hard land. Nothing for a man's mount to nibble on. He hurried toward the stall with the fresh oats and as he came near it the Morgan stopped kicking. But it was still making a queer sound. Not like a horse at all. It wasn't a whinny and it wasn't a snort. It sounded to Johnny Wade like a person sobbing with pain or gasping for breath. Very queer. He slowed his step, staring at the black stallion in the gloom. The horse stared back, its eyes yellow, reflecting the light that filtered in from the street.

"What's the matter, boy?" Johnny Wade said quietly. He was a boy who talked to horses, and horses talked to him. They told him what they wanted by the sounds they made, or by the way they pawed the ground or moved their heads. This horse was telling him nothing.

There was a rustle of straw in the adjoining stall followed by a sharp cry. Johnny Wade felt his blood freeze and the small hairs on the back of his neck crawled toward his scalp. Something was happening in the end stall, something terrible. He knew what it was. Drunken men had come into the stables in the past, lurching from the Silver Dollar full of whiskey and blind rage, fighting it out toe to toe with knife or fist. They'd find the losers in the morning, lying crumpled on the foot-trodden, bloody straw.

He thought of going back to the tack room for the shotgun, but he was a big boy, strong as a man, and the heavy iron bucket in his hand could be a potent weapon. He tightened his grip on the handle and inched his way toward the front stall. He could see nothing at first, just vague shadows moving on the straw, then the shadows took shape.

Johnny Wade felt the bucket slip from his fingers and he made no move to hold onto it. He wanted to turn away and run back to the rear of the stable, but his feet seemed rooted to the ground. He stared open mouthed at what was taking place. The woman was Callie Travers, her blonde hair tangled across her face, her body half naked. Callie, no doubt about it. He couldn't see the man who lay on top of her, but somehow he knew who it would be. His mouth turned dry as ashes and his face burned with a rush of blood.

Suddenly it was over. The frenzied movement ceased. Callie Travers screamed once, her body arching convulsively before going limp. She looked like a rag doll that a child had thrown aside. The man rose from her sprawled form and knelt for a moment in the straw to adjust

his clothes. When he reached down for his gunbelt he spotted Johnny Wade standing in the passage between the stalls.

"I want my gear, son."

Johnny Wade could only nod. His tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth. All he could do was point to where the stranger's saddle rested on a wooden sawhorse by the stable door. The tall man rose to his feet, dusted flecks of straw from his shirt, picked up his bottle of whiskey, and walked out of the stall without so much as a glance at Callie Travers. He took a worn leather saddlebag from the back of the saddle and slung it over one shoulder, then slipped a Winchester carbine out of the boot and held it lightly in his right hand.

"I'll be at the hotel," he said. "I might stick around a day or two so keep lookin' after my mount."

"Yes, sir," Johnny Wade said, his voice thick, the words barely coherent.

"A dollar a day and I'll pay up when I leave. That okay with you?"

The boy nodded, afraid to trust his voice again. The stranger turned on his heel and walked off across the street. There was a crowd gathering in front of the Silver Dollar but the man paid no attention to it. A few people were pointing excitedly at him but he just kept walking toward the lights of the hotel.

Johnny Wade let his breath out slowly and licked his dry lips. He didn't know why there was a crowd in front of the saloon but he wanted to be a part of it. He didn't want to be standing around when Callie Travers crawled out of the stall.

Henry Belding sat behind the desk in the small lobby of his hotel. He was squinting at the dog-eared page of a newspaper when the stranger walked in. The sight startled him. He let the paper drop and stared myopically at the tall, dust-streaked man standing in the open doorway. Belding took great pride in his hotel. It was the largest structure in Lago and boasted a brass bathing tub on each floor, carpets in the rooms and the best feather beds in the territory. Traveling men and mining engineers stayed at the hotel, as did bankers from the East and the circuit judge when he came to town. It wasn't a place that catered to drifting cowhands, especially one that walked in off the street carrying a carbine and a bottle of whiskey.

"I want a room," the stranger said.

Henry Belding cleared his throat and peered owlishly at the man over his thick glasses. He didn't like the sight of him and he didn't want him in his hotel.

"There's a rooming house down the street. Mrs. Fletcher's place.

You can't miss it."

The stranger ignored the directions. "I want a room—here. On the second floor, facing the street."

He walked slowly over to the desk and leaned against it. Henry Belding tried not to look at the carbine but he was aware of it. Sweat formed on the round, hairless dome of his skull and trickled down his brow. He had a handkerchief in his back pocket but he didn't care to move his hands from the desk to reach for it.

"I may have a room," he said bleakly.

"I thought you might."

Belding took a key from the board behind the desk and placed it on the counter. The stranger picked it up with his gun hand and started for the stairs.

"Wait a minute," Belding called out. "You didn't sign the register."

He flipped open the heavy book and reached for a pen, but his new guest was already climbing the stairs. By all rights he could throw the man out for not signing, boot him into the street along with his dirty saddlebags and his half empty bottle of whiskey. Henry Belding thought about it—then he reached for his handkerchief and mopped his sweating face.

"Who was that, Henry?"

He jumped, startled out of his skin, but it was only his wife standing in the doorway with a shopping basket on her arm. He glared at her and shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket.

"You're late, Sarah. I told you I don't like you out after sundown. I told you that."

"I was talking with Mrs. Lake." She stepped further into the lobby, gazing up the stairwell. There was a sound of footsteps on the second floor landing and then the closing of a door. "Who checked in, Henry?"

"Nobody," he snapped. "Nobody checked in."

She frowned, puzzled. "But I saw …"

Henry Belding sighed in exasperation. There was no point in trying to hide anything from her. She was like a child, always asking questions, pressing and badgering until he answered them.

"A man took a room, but he didn't sign the book. He didn't check in, Sarah. I just gave him number six for the night. He'll … he'll be leaving in the morning."

"Who is he?" She was breathless with suppressed excitement.

"I don't know," Belding said, his voice rising. "Just a stranger. Now will you hurry up and fix my supper? I'm like to starve waiting for my

food."

"Yes, Henry."

She sounded subdued, but Belding wasn't fooled. She'd keep after him if he gave her half a chance. She'd want to know what the stranger looked like, what he was wearing, what he did, where he had come from, and where he was going. He watched her cross the lobby toward the door to their small apartment. She was looking up the stairs, hoping to see the stranger standing there. She was pretty. God knows she was pretty, but she was a trial. There were times when Henry Belding cursed the day he had taken pity on a poor orphan and married her.

"We'll read the Book tonight Sarah," he said firmly. "Judges."

She hesitated for a step, then continued toward the door beneath the stairwell.

"We've read Judges, Henry. I recall it. 'To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.' " She paused with her hand on the doorknob and looked back at her husband with a puzzled frown. "Henry … you never did tell me what *hearken* means in that sense. Why 'hearken than the fat of rams'?"

"Hearken means *hearken* and that's all there is to it." Henry Belding reached for his handkerchief again and dabbed at his neck. "Fix my supper, woman, and we'll go on to the book of Samuel."

"Yes, Henry."

He watched her go into their rooms and he was glad of her departure. A child. That was all, simply a child. Questions and more questions. There were times when his brain whirled. He looked down at the registry book. He was a man who found comfort in books—the Bible, of course, and the books that revealed a man's worth, the books of profit and loss. The register would not correlate to his ledger. There was a paying guest in room number six on the second floor. That the man had failed to sign the register did not mean that he would refuse to pay his bill. The omission of an entry irked him and so he picked up the pen, stabbed the nib into the inkwell and wrote on the proper line —ROOM 6—A STRANGER.

He wedged a chair under the doorknob and checked to make certain the back legs would dig into the floor if anyone tried to push the door open. Satisfied, he paced the tiny room taking note of its contents and its relation to the building. A room on the second floor with two windows overlooking the main street. The porch roof was two feet below the windows, stretching the width of the hotel. The angle of the roof cut off the man's view of the street directly below him, but he had a good view of the town's approaches.

The man moved easily in the darkness, ignoring the kerosene lamp on the table by the bed. He set down his gear and stripped to his pants, dropping his boots, hat, and shirt on the floor. He flopped wearily on the bed with his carbine and his bottle and lay there for a moment staring at the ceiling. The curtains stirred in the night breeze and made hazy patterns of the rising moon. It was quiet and peaceful in the room, but the man knew that sleep would come hard if it came at all. Propping a pillow against the headboard he sat back, resting the carbine across his stomach. He drank the whiskey slowly and when it was gone sleep came to him in black waves. The bottle slipped from his hand and rolled off the edge of the bed to the floor.

The ore wagons moved out at night, rumbling down the street toward the moon-washed desert on their way to the railhead at Fort Bower. The mule teams struggled in the traces to get the big wheels turning and the teamsters laid heavily on their whips. The twenty-foot lead-tipped whips cracked in the stillness of the night like the sharp snapping of dry boards. The sound cut through the man's whiskey sleep and caused the muscles of his jaw to tighten and twitch. He groaned like a man in pain and turned his head from side to side on the sweat-soaked pillow.

The dream came as it always did, no matter how much whiskey he had drunk or how deep his exhaustion, no matter what he did in order to forget The street in his dream, a dusty, cart-rutted street flanked by shuttered wooden buildings, looked just the way it had on that night. A tall man stood in a patch of moonlight ringed by shadowed riders on dark horses. His face was pale and there was blood on his hands. The man raised his hands to cover his face as whips snaked at him, cutting the back of his hands into ragged strips.

There was a gun in the dream but the gun lay on the ground half covered by dust. There was a badge in the dream, a silver-plated star pinned to the tall man's shirt. The badge was not a shield from the fury of the whips. There was leather in the dream, plaited thongs of rawhide tipped with lead shot. The leather sliced flesh to bone. The leather cut the tall man down like a dry reed and dropped him in the dust. There was agony in the dream, and rage. One terrible cry from the tall man's throat. And there was silence in the dream. The silence of death.

The man rose with a cry and ran the flat of his hand across his face. The curtains fluttered and he stared at the open windows, straining to hear horses galloping up the street. He heard nothing but the sigh of the wind and the distant braying of a mule. Swinging his legs off the bed he sat with the carbine cradled in his arms, waiting patiently for

the dawn.

Chapter III

The smell of fresh coffee struck him as he came down the stairs toward the lobby. It made his dry mouth water and his lean belly contract. There was a hammering in his head from too much whiskey and too little sleep and he would have given his soul for a mug of coffee, black and scalding.

"Good morning."

The voice was musical, a silver chime. The man paused at the last step and looked down toward the desk. Sarah Belding was standing there placing fresh geraniums in a shallow bowl. She wore a dress of pale green calico that accentuated the darker green of her eyes and heightened the ivory whiteness of her skin. She was a beautiful sight to see first thing on a sunny morning.

"Did you sleep well?" She tilted her head slightly to one side when she spoke and brushed a strand of black hair from her forehead with a pale hand.

"Yes, ma'am." He was aware of her eyes upon him, looking him over with frank curiosity. He had seen himself in the beveled mirror in his room and so he knew what she was seeing—a gaunt-faced drifter with a three-day growth of beard and a week's residue of trail dust. He pulled his hat brim toward his eyebrows and kept on walking, down the final step and across the lobby toward the open front door.

Henry Belding ran as fast as his paunch and his thin legs would carry him, up the street and onto the porch of the hotel. He reached the door just as the stranger appeared in it and he stepped quickly to one side to avoid a collision.

"Good morning … sir." He struggled for breath, his hands fluttering in front of his chest.

The stranger nodded, looking up and down the street.

"About the room …" Belding said quickly. "It's yours for as long as you need it. I … I trust your stay in Lago will be … happy and … prosperous."

Four men were standing in a tight group in front of a barber shop across the way and the stranger tensed, his hand moving to the Colt at his side, but the men shook hands and walked off. One of them laughed and tossed the smoking butt of a cigar into the middle of the street.

"I'll let you know. I may stay and I may not."

Henry Belding forced a smile. “I hope you do … sir. I truly hope you do.”

The stranger nodded curtly and stepped from the porch into the sun. He didn’t like the way the man was fawning over him, almost bowing to him. It made his skin crawl and his beard itch. There was a sign above the barber shop that read: “Shave and Bath—50¢,” and he headed for it walking slowly and stiffly, ignoring the glances he was getting from the people on the street. It seemed like half the population of Lago was up and about and they were all looking at him, not warily like the day he rode in, but with frank, bold stares. He paused in the center of the road to let a hearse pulled by two black horses rumble by. There were three plain wood coffins on the hearse, one inside and the other two lashed to the top like a load of cord wood. He knew who was in them and didn’t remove his hat in respect for the dead. Neither did any other man he could see. After the hearse had passed he strode on through its dust, past a group of sidewalk loungers and into the barber shop.

The shop smelled of bay rum, soap, and steam. There was an elderly, sad-eyed man seated in the single barber’s chair, his jaws lathered and his shirt covered with a striped cloth. Titus Anderson, Lago’s tonsorial artist and dentist, grinned his welcome as the stranger came through the doorway. He had just finished stropping a razor and the steel blade sparkled as he waved his hand toward a bench along one wall.

“Take a seat, mister … won’t be more’n five minutes.”

The stranger removed his hat and slapped dust from his pants. “You got a sign says baths.”

The barber bobbed and grinned. “Yes, sir, best bath in town. Hot water and store soap.” He glanced toward the rear of the shop where a blanket hanging from a stretched rope served as a partition. “Mordecai! Get that tub full of hot water! Mordecai! Gentleman wants a bath!”

Mordecai Fortune peeped around the edge of the blanket and smiled broadly when he saw the stranger. “Yes, sir, Mister Anderson!” Mordecai squealed. “I got it half full now … been anticipatin’.”

“That’s the way to do it, Mordecai,” the barber said. He motioned the stranger toward the back. “Go on, mister. Mordecai’ll look after you.” He waited until the stranger had ducked around the blanket before turning back to his customer.

“That’s the one, Sam. If you want to talk to him, now’s the time to do it.”

“I know when to talk to him,” the man said moodily.

“Sure you do, Sam.” The barber tested the razor against his thumb.

“I just thought that now would be a good time, is all.”

“Good a time as any, I suppose,” the man sighed.

“That’s the way to talk, Sam!”

Sam Shaw, Marshal of Lago, the only law within two hundred sun-scorched miles, tilted his head to one side, closed his eyes and waited for the cold touch of the razor.

“Hot enough for you?” Mordecai grinned evilly as he dumped another pail of steaming water into the large brass tub. The stranger, naked, his flesh the color of boiled meat, gritted his teeth to keep from howling like a scalded cat.

“Fine … just fine.” He rubbed gingerly at his chest with a piece of soap, half expecting to see his skin peel away in his hand.

“Hotter the better,” the dwarf said. “Steam the dirt right out of the bones.” He waddled on his crooked legs toward the back of the shop.

The stranger raised his arms in a gesture of surrender. “That’s enough. Any more hot water and I’ll be cooked.”

“Not hot,” Mordecai said. “Cold … right from the pump. That’s how the Apache do it. Jump in a hot spring then jump in a cold. Live to be a hundred doing that.”

The stranger looked dubious and reached for a sponge. He was soaping his back with it when Sam Shaw pushed the blanket to one side and walked up to the tub.

“The name’s Shaw,” he said. “Sam Shaw. I’m the marshal here.”

The stranger’s glance was brief but thorough. He noticed the shiny badge pinned to the homespun shirt, the ill-cut trousers and heavy boots, the worn leather belt and the absence of a pistol. The man was a fanner walking around with a tin badge.

Shaw squirmed under the scrutiny. “I can come back later if you want. It ain’t important that we talk now.”

The stranger dipped his head into the tub and rubbed soap in his wet hair. “You talk an’ I’ll listen,” the stranger said.

The marshal cleared his throat and looked around for some place to sit. There was a broken-backed chair next to the stove in the far corner of the room but he didn’t feel like fetching it.

“Well,” he said lamely, “it’s like this. That is to say …” He was struggling to find the right words when the quiet of Titus Anderson’s tonsorial parlor and public bath was shattered by a voice of such awesome ferocity it chilled Marshal Shaw to the marrow.

“YOU ROTTEN SONOFABITCH!”

He turned in horror to see Callie Travers racing past a cowering

Titus Anderson with a gun in her hand—a small, shiny, pearl-handled .32 caliber six-shooter—a lady's gun if there ever was one, but no lady was holding it.

"Now, Callie … now … now …" Sam Shaw tried to stop her by waving his hands, but he might as well have tried to stop a runaway by sticking out his foot. She was past him in a flash, pumping bullets at the bath tub … BANG! BANG! BANG! … the small slugs slapping soapy water to the ceiling or clanging off the thick copper. The stranger rose from the tub in steam and spray, diving over the far side like a salmon … BANG! BANG! …

"Callie! No!"

Shaw dove for her gun hand but Callie sidestepped him neatly and drew a bead on a bare buttock.

"I'LL KILL YOU—YOU BASTARD!"

She waited one second too long. Mordecai Fortune stepped in through the rear door and hurled five gallons of cold well water flush in her face.

Even Sam Shaw could subdue a wet woman. He picked up the soggy, hysterical mess that was Callie Travers off the floor and carried her out of the shop. The stranger stayed behind the big tub until Callie's screams of outrage faded in the distance. Then he slid back into the warm bath.

"Thank you, Mordecai."

The dwarf grinned. "It was a pleasure."

The stranger shook his head in bewilderment. "I wonder what made her so mad?"

Mordecai laughed so hard he lost his footing and slipped on the wet floor. "You didn't go back," he shrieked. "You didn't go back for more! Oh … oh … I could tell you about Callie Travers!"

"Go ahead," the stranger said softly.

It felt good to be clean. He was shiny as a new dime. Mordecai had brushed his clothes and polished his boots. Titus Anderson had shaved his face and cut his hair. He was gleaming with hair oil and pungent with bay rum. People stared at him as he walked toward Hobson's Cafe and he stared right back.

When Sam Shaw found him he was halfway through a pound of fried steak smothered with red beans and thick slices of onion. "Mind if I sit down?"

The stranger took his time swallowing and Sam Shaw waited patiently, hat in hand, turning the brim around and around between blunt fingers.

“Make yourself comfortable, Marshal,” the stranger said. “I reckon there are one or two things you want to say.”

Shaw pulled a chair over to the table and sat down. His movements were ponderous, as though every action he made had to be thought over at great length. “They’d been askin’ for it for a long time. Long as I can remember.”

“Who?”

Shaw toyed with his hat. “The boys you shot. Struttin’ around with guns all the time, braggin’ about how hot they were—’specially that Billy Borders. He was the worst of the bunch. Nobody sheddin’ any tears over those boys, I can tell you.”

The stranger cut into his steak. “You sayin’ that nobody’s mad? Is that it?”

“In a manner of speakin’.”

The stranger chewed on a piece of meat and washed it down with a swig of coffee. “I know one person in this town who’s mad as all hell.”

The marshal chuckled softly and pushed a dent in the crown of his hat. “Callie’s been wavin’ it around since she was sixteen. You ain’t the first man to roll her in the hay. No, sir, not by a long shot. ’Course, she’s been Stacey Bridges’ girl on and off—mostly off since he’s been in jail the past year.”

He coughed discreetly and stared at his hands. The stranger went on with his meal, chewing slowly and thoughtfully.

“Is that all you wanted to tell me, Marshal? That the town ain’t fixin’ to string me up for murder and rape?”

“Well, folks are upset some. Nobody likes killin’ and public fornicatin’. But the plain fact is the town would be grateful if you’d just settle here for a spell.”

“Why?”

“ ’Cause we’ve got a little problem.” He gave a nervous tug at his ear. “Stacey Bridges … and the Carlin boys, Cole and Dan. They been down at the territorial prison for a year … hard labor on the rock pile. They’ll be comin’ back to town and it won’t exactly be a friendly visit—if you know what I mean.”

The stranger took a sip of coffee. “No. I don’t know what you mean.”

The elderly marshal squirmed uncomfortably. “They got it in for the town and … well … we could sure use a man of your … uh … skill.”

“I’m not a hired gun.”

“I didn’t say you was. But we’d make it worth your while to stick around a few days. There’ll be a council meeting over at the funeral parlor later. You’re welcome to come if you want.”

The stranger pushed back his chair and stood up. “I don’t like meetings. If you have anything else to say I’ll be at the saloon.”

He reached into his pocket but the marshal beat him to the draw and dropped a silver dollar on the table.

“The meal’s on the town.”

“I won’t argue about it.”

“And this is on me.” He slipped a cigar from his shirt pocket and pressed it into the stranger’s hand.

“I won’t argue about that, either.”

“A meal, a cigar, that ain’t a way of butterin’ you up. It’s just a … a friendly gesture. One man to another.”

The stranger sniffed the cigar, then stuck it in his mouth. “Sure. One man to another.” He found a match in his back pocket and struck it on the table. “Tell me, when does this Stacey Bridges get out of prison?”

“Him and the Carlin boys been a year on the rock pile.” He swallowed hard and stared grimly at the floor. “They’re due out today.”

The stranger smiled and blew a thin stream of blue smoke out of the corner of his mouth.

“You don’t have a thing to worry about, Marshal. Those men have had a year to ponder their sins. Why, they’ll come riding back to town just as gentle as saints.”

Sam Shaw shuddered and trailed the stranger out of the cafe and into the street. “You don’t know these bravos, mister. They swore they’d see blood flow and hair fly. They got hate in their hearts for every man, woman, and child in this town.”

“Then I’d say you folks have a problem.”

“You’re damn right, and you’d be doing us a favor if you’d keep an open mind about staying.”

The stranger puffed lazily on the cigar and watched the smoke drift in the wind. “Oh, my mind’s open enough, but I got a lot on it.”

“Maybe I can help.” He squared his hat and stuck his chest out showing the badge. A servant of the people.

The stranger flicked cigar ash at his feet. “I can’t decide whether to walk over to the saloon and have a beer, or walk over to the saloon and have a whiskey. What do you think, Marshal?”

A vein throbbed in Sam Shaw’s forehead, a pulsing blue cord. “Whiskey,” he said tautly.

The stranger nodded his thanks. “I appreciate the advice.”

The marshal of Lago watched the man stroll toward the saloon. He’d been made fun of, but he wasn’t bitter about it. The stranger simply

didn't understand his concern—the town's concern—for what was bound to take place in a few days' time. He looked down the street toward the edge of town. The road across the flats was empty. He could follow the road with his eyes until it faded to nothingness in the vast land, a thin ribbon winding toward the mountains. Fort Bower was beyond the mountains. So was Yellow Springs and Okapa, Carson Forks and Sheridan, Big Muddy and Faro City. The little towns were strung along the road clear to Rio Verde and the border. Stacey and the Carlins had a long way to come, but there was not the slightest doubt in Sam Shaw's mind that they would make it.

The gate creaked open on rusty hinges, pushed by a sweating guard in a faded blue uniform. He opened the gate just wide enough for a man to walk through, then stepped to one side and cradled his short-barreled shotgun in the crook of his left arm. No prisoner was free until he had stepped through the gate and the three men walking across the yard from the main cell block were no exception. If they ran—swung at the guards who walked beside them—did anything at all that was against the prison rules, the guard at the gate would shoot them down.

Jess Harper, warden of the territorial prison at Rio Verde, knew the rules better than anybody. They were his rules, and there were times when he hoped a prisoner would break them. As he trailed the three escorted men across the yard, he hoped one of them would do something stupid so he could blow the back of his head off. He kept his eyes on Dan Carlin. If any of the trio was likely to make a fool move it was hulking Dan Carlin. The man was all muscle and no brain, a dim-witted savage. Dan Carlin had spent most of his time in prison in the solitary cell for smashing a fellow prisoner in the face with a sledge hammer. They'd missed his brawn on the rock pile, but the man couldn't be trusted and they'd kept him in a cage for the past nine months. If his bitterness got the best of him he might reach out with his big hands and try to throttle the guard beside him. If he did … The warden smiled to himself and thumbed back the hammers of his double-barreled shotgun, the one the prisoners called "sweet Jesus."

Then there was Cole Carlin, slinking along like a rat, his small head constantly moving on his scrawny neck, darting quick, furtive glances at everything around him. Cole might have a crude knife somewhere on his body and he just might try to use it as a last gesture of defiance before racing through the open gate to freedom.

"Try it," the warden muttered softly.

He gave no thought to Stacey Bridges. Stacey was too smart to make

any meaningless gestures. Stacey had put in his time, doing what he was told, calling every guard "sir," staying out of trouble. Blond, blue-eyed Stacey had fooled some of the guards. They had pegged him as a God-fearing young man who had strayed from the path of righteousness one time and would never do so again. But the warden had not been fooled. He had spotted the violence lurking beneath the surface of those farm boy eyes. Stacey Bridges would be back.

"All right, hold it!" the warden barked. They had reached the gate. The escorts moved out of the sun and stood in the shade of the granite wall.

"According-to-the-laws-of-this-territory-you-prisoners-are-now-free-to-go-having-served-your-just-punishment-and-paid-your-debt-to-the-people-of-this-territory." Jess Harper paused for breath. The formality was over. "Git your tails out of here. Go on, git!"

Stacey Bridges turned his back to the gate and faced the warden. "Seems to me you got some things that belong to us, Warden."

"Sure I do, Bridges," Harper said. There were three gunbelts dangling from his left shoulder. The pistols in the holsters were tarnished from lack of care. Slipping the belts off he hurled them through the gate into the sandy road. "Them guns are your tickets back here, I'll keep a cell warm for each one of you bastards."

Dan and Cole Carlin hurried through the gate to freedom, but Bridges stuck his ground, head held high in defiance. "We had three good horses when we came in here. We want 'em back."

The warden laughed, one short, explosive hoot. "Horses? You dumb sonofabitch. What the hell do you think I've been feedin you?"

Bridges took a step forward, but "sweet Jesus" was leveled at his chest and he thought better of it. Turning angrily on his heels, he strode out of the prison as the gate swung shut behind him.

Dan Carlin had the gunbelts in his hand and was wiping sand from them. He looked at Stacey's furious face and frowned in bewilderment.

"Didn't taste like horsemeat to me, Stace. I've eaten horsemeat, an' that slop he fed us weren't horsemeat. Horsemeat got a …"

"Shut up!" Bridges grabbed one of the belts and buckled it around his waist. "The sonofabitch sold our horses."

Cole Carlin swiveled his head from side to side. All he could see beyond the looming bulk of the prison was flat, empty land. "We'll never make it back to Lago without horses, Stacey."

Bridges spat in the dust. "We'll make it. We'll get back to Lago if we have to crawl there on our goddamn knees!"

Chapter IV

"Meeting will please come to order!" Caleb Bowen struck the table with a wooden mallet. No one in the crowded room paid him the slightest attention. Ezra Malkin was arguing with Thaddeus Brown, and Jason Hobart was shouting at Henry Belding. "Meeting will please come to order, damn it all to hell!"

He hit the table so hard that his silk hat fell off. The sight of Caleb Bowen without his funeral topper brought an instant hush to the assembled men. The undertaker plucked his hat from the floor and placed it back on his head with as much dignity as he could muster.

"That's better," he said in injured tones. "We got a lot to talk over an' we ain't going to get anywhere screamin' down one another's throats. Now, as the duly elected mayor of the town of Lago, I call this meeting of the council to order, and as the first piece of business I'd like to ask Marshal Shaw to give us a report on his negotiations."

There was a ragged clapping of hands as Sam Shaw rose from his seat near the door. Caleb Bowen took his own seat and scanned the room. He didn't listen to Sam Shaw because he knew what the marshal had to say—nothing. He looked at the faces of the councilmen and tried to judge by their expressions how they'd vote. He was certain of Belding, Titus Anderson, Thaddeus Brown, and Jack Hobson. They'd felt from the beginning that strong measures should have been taken. Thaddeus Brown had even suggested sending someone to Faro City to hire a couple of gunslingers. The proposal had been defeated by a narrow margin. The Reverend Bass would vote his conscience, so that was a lost vote, and Ezra Malkin and Jason Hobart would go along with Dave Drake and Morgan Allen. Drake and Allen, they were the keys to what was done—or not done.

Lago had been built on silver, the silver that Dave Drake had been the first to discover and Morgan Allen the first to exploit. Between the two of them, they controlled eighty percent of the ore that came out of the Dragoon lode. Drake-Allen money made the wheels turn. When they spoke, people listened.

"How much did you offer him, Marshal?" Thaddeus Brown asked the question and Sam Shaw looked toward the mayor for an answer.

"Well, Sam?" Caleb Bowen said. "Did you make him an offer or not?"

The marshal scowled and stared at his feet. "I didn't feel I could go that far … not till after the meetin'. And besides, like I was just sayin',

he told me he wasn't a hired gun."

"Everybody's got a price," Bowen snapped. "All we have to vote on here is how much were willing to shell out."

"No, Mayor, that ain't all."

"The chair recognizes Councilman Drake," Bowen said. "Speak your piece, Dave."

Dave Drake stood up, a tall, imposing man with iron gray hair. He wore a black suit and a string tie—a business man's clothes—but he was a man who had spent the bulk of his life digging in the ground with pick and shovel and fighting for his claims with fist or gun. A strong man, in body and will.

"We have a killer in our town, gentleman. And a rapist. Three young men slaughtered in cold blood and a woman's honor besmirched."

Titus Anderson leaped to his feet. "I won't say nothing about Callie Traver's honor, Dave, but those three bastards …"

Bowen cut him off by pounding his mallet. "Wait your turn, Titus. Now, goddammit, this is a democratic meeting and every man here has the right to speak his mind without being shouted down."

"I wasn't shouting," the barber muttered as he sat back.

Drake ignored the outburst. "Three young men shot down in a saloon by a man with a pistol hidden in his palm. Lago is a peaceful town. Always has been. Always will. Why, we even have a marshal who doesn't sling iron at his waist. Doesn't have to. He has the word of the law. It's the law that speaks in Lago, not pistols."

He sat down to a sprinkling of applause.

Titus Anderson bounced upright as though propelled by springs. "I want my turn, Caleb!"

"Go ahead," Bowen said wearily. "But make it short."

The small room in the back of the funeral parlor was stifling. There was only one window and that was a tiny one. Caleb Bowen's customers had no need of a view.

"Bill Borders and those other two rats weren't murdered," Anderson said fiercely. "They was shot in a fair fight. Hell, Dave, some of your own teamsters were sittin' right there when it happened. Ask 'em. They'll tell you what happened. Borders ragged him into a gunfight and lost. It's just as simple as that."

"He had a hideout gun in his hand," Drake said doggedly. "A derringer."

"And damn lucky he had it! Hell, he must've heard about this place. Word must've gone around the goddamn territory."

"Mister Anderson, *please!"* The Reverend Bass rose slowly, wiping the back of his neck with a linen handkerchief. "Mister Anderson … all this profanity. Now, I may be out of order, but I'd like all this shouting and bickering and profaning the Lord's name to stop. We are civilized, decent men here. Let's face the problem at hand and deal with it in a respectable manner."

Bowen slammed the mallet against the edge of the desk. "I do second that motion, Reverend. And there'll be no more talk about murder and rape, either. Those subjects are irrelevant to the issue at hand."

He put down the gavel and shuffled through a few papers that were spread out on the table in front of him. Finding the sheet he was looking for he picked it up and waved it like a flag. "This here is a report from the coroner, me, which I will turn over to the circuit judge when he gets here next month. This here paper is the *official* report on the condition of Bill Borders, Tommy Morris, and Fred Short when Marshal Shaw called me over to the Silver Dollar yesterday evening. The paper, like I say, is *official* and is written in *official* language. Put simply, this report states that the before-mentioned sonsofbitches were dead as mutton when I found them, and that every damn bit of lead in their bodies could have been a *direct* cause of death."

"What's the point of all this?" Drake sighed.

"The point, Mister Drake, is that this stranger is one hell of a good shot!"

Morgan Allen coughed for attention. He sat next to his partner and, like Drake, wore a suit that reflected expensive tailoring. But there the similarity between the men ended. Allen had never done a hard day's work in his fifty years of living. His hands were white and soft, and his face a placid moon of well-fed flesh. He suffered from the heat, and when he spoke his words came in short gasps.

"You called him a stranger, Mister Mayor. Yes, a stranger." He looked over at Henry Belding with tortured eyes. "He's staying at your hotel, Henry. How did he sign the book?"

"He didn't," Belding said.

Morgan frowned. "He didn't give you a name? Nothing?"

"No."

Morgan rubbed a sweating palm across his thick lips. "Odd. A man with no name who can shoot like the devil. I talked to Johnny Rule. Johnny was in the Silver Dollar having a beer with some of the boys. He saw the fight. He said he never saw anyone shoot so fast in his life. The man got his shots off before you could count to two. Now, what does that make you folks think of? Well, I'll tell you. It makes *me* think of a gunman. Yes … a professional gunman. And if you ask me, that's

just the kind of man we're looking for."

Dave Drake shot up, his face black with rage. "What the hell …"

Morgan calmed him with one frigid glance. "I know my partner is dead set against shattering the peaceful image of this town, but I'd say I know Stacey and the Carlins better than anybody in Lago. I couldn't control those boys a year ago, and I know damn well I couldn't control them now. I say we ask this stranger to stick around, pay him whatever he wants."

The reverend looked aghast. "A drunken killer?"

"I'm in sympathy with your feelings, Reverend," Morgan said. "But we must face up to facts. Stacey Bridges and the Carlin brothers are killers too. The worst that could happen is that they all kill each other. To be blunt, we set a wolf to catch a wolf … or rather, wolves."

He took his seat, his face contorted as he struggled for air. Caleb Bowen spotted his condition and slammed down the mallet. "I move we recess after voice vote. Those in favor of hiring this man say aye, those not in favor say no."

Only the Reverend Bass voiced his objection. Dave Drake said nothing.

"The ayes have it," Bowen said. "Sam, you make the offer. A couple of you other men go with him, maybe Titus and Henry … put it to him straight."

"How much can we offer?" Henry Belding asked.

"Whatever the hell he wants!"

Dave Drake walked in rigid silence but slowed his pace so that Morgan could keep up with him. He didn't speak until they neared their office at the top of the street.

"Callie's going to claw my face off. She wants that man dead or out of town."

"I don't care what Callie wants," Morgan wheezed. "We've got an investment here and we aren't tossing it away because a whore's angry she didn't get paid."

"Callie is no whore," Drake mumbled.

"She'll do till the town gets one." He stopped in the shade of an ore wagon and wiped his streaming face with a sodden handkerchief. "Now you listen to me, Dave. Callie was Stacey's girl and he won't take kindly to your moving in with her. But your fooling around with his woman isn't the only grudge he'll have and you damn well know it. We get Stacey or Stacey gets us." He tapped the side of the loaded wagon with his fist. "What's in this wagon is our only concern, Dave, and the sooner you realize where your loyalties lie the better it'll be

for both of us."

Drake glowered at his partner. "I can make it up to Stacey."

"And what if you can't? A year in prison changes a man, and it could only change him for the worse. We don't need him any more and I say we write him off the books any damn way we can."

The stranger was standing at the bar sipping a glass of whiskey when Sam Shaw walked into the place followed by Titus Anderson and Henry Belding. The stranger acknowledged their presence by a barely perceptible nod.

Sam Shaw appeared to be speechless and it took a harsh whisper from Belding and a poke in the ribs from Titus Anderson to make him talk.

"We … we had our town meeting, mister," Shaw said falteringly. "We … we took things to vote."

"That's the way to do it," the stranger said. He finished his drink and poured himself another.

"Yes, sir. Well, anyway … the council would like you to stay here in Lago. Just name your price."

The stranger savored his whiskey, rolling it around on his tongue before swallowing. "We already had this out Marshal. I'm not in the hired gun business."

"You don't have to shoot anybody," Henry Belding said quickly. "Just be out on the street when they ride in. When Bridges and the Carlins see you they'll know better than to try anything."

The stranger eyed him with contempt and looked back at his glass. "You people only have one problem—a short supply of guts. You don't need me."

Titus Anderson drew himself up to his full height. "There's nothing wrong with our guts, mister."

"Perhaps if you showed us …" Shaw ventured.

"That's right," Anderson cut in. "We've got some good men in this town. Men with plenty of guts," he added pointedly.

The stranger sighed, his fingers playing with the glass in front of him. "All right. I owe the town for some steak and beans. I'll show you what to do and we'll call it square."

"Fair enough," Anderson said.

The three men waited patiently until the stranger had finished his whiskey and then trailed him out of the saloon and into the street.

The sun was high and cast no shadows. Nothing moved except a big yellow dog trying to crawl under the raised boards of the sidewalk.

The stranger walked into the center of the street and waited for the others to move up beside him.

"See the church?" he said, shielding his eyes from the sun. "That's the line, the beginning of town. You put two men up in the belfry, one with good eyes and one handy with a rifle. These friends of yours, they gotta come down that road and a man in the church tower will be able to see them coming ten miles away."

"That's right," Henry Belding agreed.

"Now then," the stranger continued. "See that fence across from the church? You place two men behind that fence with shotguns, and two more men with shotguns up the road a little … maybe in front of that feed store so they won't get hit by the men behind the fence. You folks following me?"

"Yes," Titus Anderson said weakly. The firmness he had displayed in the saloon was melting in the sun.

The stranger removed his hat and held it aloft. "And just about where we're standing now you have the man who gives the signal, standing like I'm standing, right in the open with a hat in his hand. The moment your visitors cross the line into town he lowers the hat and it's just bang, bang, bang—rifle from the belfry, shotguns from the fence, shotguns from the feed store. Bang, bang, bang, and it's all over." He placed his hat firmly on his head.

The silence was painful. Henry Belding's face was ashen and Titus Anderson's face was wax. Sam Shaw stared at the ground and moved a foot in the dust.

"We … we couldn't do that," Belding croaked. "That'd be murder."

"Murder," Anderson echoed. "Cold-blooded slaughter."

The stranger shrugged his lean shoulders. "It's up to you." He adjusted his hat, pulling the brim low over his eyes. "I was just showing you how it could be done. You do it or you don't do it. Makes no difference to me."

"We'll … think about it," Belding said. "Right now I … I gotta get back to the hotel."

"I have a customer waiting," Anderson said, forcing a smile. "But we'll think it over, mister … we'll sure give it some thought."

The two men scurried off without a backward glance.

The stranger didn't bother to watch them go. "Like I was saying, it's a question of guts."

Sam Shaw shook his head. His long, sad face was drawn and haggard. "They're decent folk. This whole thing is too much for 'em. They couldn't shoot men down in the street no matter how bad they was."

“Then they’ll just have to take what’s coming.” He took a half-smoked cigar from his shirt pocket and flicked at the burnt end with a fingernail. “Hell, you’re the marshal. Why don’t you handle it?”

Sam Shaw glanced at the badge pinned over the heart. It sparkled in the sun. A shield of honor. He wondered if the stranger would understand how meaningless that badge had become.

“They call me the marshal but it don’t mean much. Folks around here don’t want a strong lawman, not if he’s going to get in the way of Dave Drake or Morgan Allen … not if he’s going to stop the silver flowing. We had a lawman here once … name of Duncan. He came on like a house afire and didn’t give a damn whose toes he stepped on.”

The stranger fished in his back pocket for a match. “What happened to him?”

“He got himself killed.” His voice was stone.

The stranger flicked the matchhead with his thumb nail and lit his cigar. The dry tobacco flared, burning like a rope.

“Now you wear the badge.”

Shaw smiled ruefully. “An’ wishing I didn’t. I’ve been a good marshal, far as it goes, but I never should’ve arrested Stacey and the Carlin boys. Never. I had no choice, but it was a stupid thing to do.”

“If you did it once you can do it again.”

The corner of the marshal’s mouth twitched violently. “No, sir … I couldn’t do it again. It was just dumb crazy luck the first time. They went on a tear one night when the circuit judge was in town. Ten people saw ’em dynamite a mine shaft. They was so drunk they was fallin’ off their horses. I had no choice but to arrest ’em, but it was only luck that kept them from killing me.”

“I hope your luck holds.” He looked at the rapidly burning cigar with distaste and dropped it at his feet. “Been nice talking to you, Marshal, but I’ve got a bottle of whiskey waiting.”

He started to walk away but Shaw gripped him by the arm the way a drowning man would clutch a log.

“You gotta help. You just *gotta.* Those boys are crazy wild. They swore they’d burn this town and bury every soul in it. That just weren’t *talk,* mister. The mayor said I could offer you anything, and by God I’ll take him at his word. You can have any damn thing you want if you’ll just stick around for three or four days.”

The stranger looked at Sam Shaw’s face. There was no mistaking the raw terror he saw in it. “What do you mean by—anything?”

Shaw waved a hand in the air, sweeping the entire town into his palm. “Whatever we got to offer—money—goods—anything at all. And we’d back your play, I swear it. We’d stand beside you with rifles

… shotguns … even our bare fists if you'll show us how."

"That's a deal," he said softly.

Shaw didn't trust his ears. He took a step backward, cocking his head warily.

"You did say …?"

The stranger nodded. "I get what I want and you folks get me."

The marshal grabbed the stranger's hand and pumped it.

"You won't regret it mister. I swear to God you won't."

The stranger pulled his hand away from the marshal's fevered grasp. "I'll think about what I want and let you know."

"Sure … sure. Take your time about it. I'll just go an' tell the others it's been settled."

"You do that."

Sam Shaw took off up the street, breaking into a loose jointed, shambling run. The stranger watched, a faint smile creasing the thin line of his lips. The town was his, the buildings and the people, handed to him out of cowardice—a gift of fear.

Chapter V

The day burnt itself out, the sun trailing plumes of orange fire across the high sky. The valley between the mesas was in deep shadow and the stumbling men could barely see the narrow trail that cut through the mesquite thickets.

Stacey Bridges set the pace, driving them forward, one punishing step after the other, each step taking them a little further from the Rio Verde, a little closer to Lago.

"Christ, Stace!" Cole Carlin's voice was a peal of agony. He staggered to his knees and rolled over on his back, panting at the sky. "I'm done."

Bridges cursed, silently and with passion. If they'd covered twenty miles they'd covered a lot. Twenty miles! Without horses they'd never make it. Without horses they were three dead men.

"Don't you boys worry about a thing. The day you get out we'll be there."

So much for Dave Drake's promise.

"The lying sonofabitch!"

Dan Carlin sank wearily to the ground beside his brother.

"Who you talkin' about, Stace?"

"That bastard Drake."

"Reckon he forgot."

"He'll remember," Bridges said darkly. "One way or the other." He stared out at the shadowed land. The last traces of sun had left the sky and the stars were popping out, big as silver dollars. "We'll stay a while, then go on. Maybe we can make Baxter Springs by sunup."

Cole groaned and covered his face with his hands.

They rested for an hour and then moved on, walking in grim silence, their eyes fixed on a skyline of hills that never seemed to get any closer. Suddenly, Bridges stopped and pointed ahead.

"Cole. Two … three miles up trail. What do you make of it?"

Cole Carlin peered into the darkness for a long time. "Could be a cabin light, or maybe a fire."

"I think it's a fire," Bridges said. "Seems to flicker too much for a lantern."

"I reckon you're right, Stace. It's a fire, all right."

"Campfire," Bridges said. "Buncha boys runnin' a herd down to the

Verde." His hand moved instinctively to the gun at his hip. "Maybe we could borrow some mounts from the remuda—if we asked real nice."

He chuckled softly to himself as he drew his gun and checked the action by starlight.

There was no sound of cattle as they drew near, but they could hear horses stirring restlessly in the darkness. The men moved silently through clumps of sage, keeping downwind of the horses that were tethered to the twisted branches of a manzanita. The campfire had burned down to a bed of glowing coals, but emitted enough light for them to see three blanket shrouded figures lying around it.

"Any horse guard?" Bridges whispered.

Cole Carlin shook his head.

"Fine and dandy. Crawl around behind the mounts and untie them lines."

Cole nodded and moved off through the brush like a ferret. Bridges and Dan Carlin waited tensely with drawn guns, the hammers making small clicking sounds as they thumbed them back.

A horse shied, whinnying loudly. One of the sleeping men jumped to his feet, tangled in his blanket and sharply outlined against the glow of the fire.

"Hey!" he yelped. "Johnny … Bart … somethin's at the …"

Bridges fired before the man could get the word out. He toppled forward into the coals and sparks whirled upward in the stiff wind. Dan Carlin emptied his gun at the bundled shapes on the ground. One twisted and writhed and Bridges darted forward, pumping bullets into the blanketed form until it lay still.

"Get the saddles, Dan." His tone was flat, emotionless. He could have been shooting squirrels.

Dan Carlin pointed his still smoking pistol at the dead men. The one in the fire was starting to burn.

"We gonna leave 'em like this, Stace?"

Bridges shrugged. "They look comfortable enough. Two sleepin' and one in hell."

They got the horses calmed down and put on the saddles. As Bridges swung up on his mount he felt happy for the first time in a long year. He cut loose with a whoop of triumph and turned the horse in a tight, dust-churning circle.

"Let's go, boys! There's a town waitin'."

He dug in his heels and the horse bolted forward, galloping through the sage toward the rising moon.

The Reverend Bass savored the night wind as he walked slowly up the street toward the hotel. The full moon gave everything an ivory glow, hiding the ugliness of weathered board and fly-specked glass. He paused several times to gaze at the distant mountains, reflecting on God's miracle that was Mother Earth. There was a sermon in the beauty of the night and he turned the thought over in his mind. Perhaps a parallel between the soul of man reflected in the purity of the moon—the blazing heat of day being the symbol of man's baser nature, whereas the night was his inherent goodness—and Godliness.

Yes, he mused, that could make a fine sermon once he clarified it and made it simpler. The people of Lago liked their Sunday preaching to be easily understood. He was deep in thought as he passed the lights of the Silver Dollar Saloon and failed to see the stranger when he stepped from the doorway and onto the street.

"Good evening, Reverend."

"Unh … good evening," he stammered, staring at the man's face in the moonlight.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"No, no," the reverend said quickly. "You merely startled me. My … my thoughts were elsewhere."

They faced each other in silence for a moment, then the reverend forced a smile.

"Well, I must be off. I … I promised a member of my congregation that I would call."

"I'll walk along with you," the stranger said.

"By all means. But I'm only going as far as the hotel."

"So am I."

They walked slowly, side by side, up the center of the street.

The stranger paused a moment to light a cigar. "You've been here a long time, haven't you, Reverend?"

"Yes," Bass said proudly. "I built the church when Lago was nothing but a tent city—a very squalid place filled with rough men. I like to think that it was the church that attracted a more decent element to Lago and made the town grow."

"What 'decent element' do you mean?"

The reverend was vaguely annoyed by the man's tone, but he concealed his irritation. "Why … good people like Ezra Malkin and his wife. They own the feed store. And the Hobarts. That's Jason Hobart's place over there … the Emporium. And then there's Thaddeus Brown, a pillar of the church and the best gunsmith west of the Mississippi. And of course you know Henry Belding. You won't find a more homey hotel …"

“West of the Mississippi,” the stranger drawled.

“Yes,” said Bass coldly. “You could say that.”

They reached the hotel and the stranger stepped politely to one side and let the older man enter first. The reverend walked briskly across the lobby to the desk where Henry Belding sat hunched over his ledger books.

“A good evening, Brother Belding.”

Belding looked up from his books. “And a good evening to you, Preacher. Mrs. Lake was hoping you’d come by.”

“And how is the dear soul?”

“Chipper as a jaybird.”

The reverend cast a pious glance toward heaven. “She has the strength of her faith, Brother Belding. She has her faith. I’ll just go on up and pay my respects to that sweet woman.”

The stranger walked up beside him and lounged indolently against the desk.

“I wouldn’t bother, Reverend.”

“What’s that you said?” He tilted his head to one side to hear better. It made him look like an inquisitive bird. “What’s that?”

“Don’t bother going up. She’ll be coming down—so will everybody else who’s staying here.”

Matthew Bass looked at Henry Belding for an explanation, but the hotel keeper was clearly unable to provide one.

“I don’t follow you, mister,” Belding said.

The stranger dropped cigar ash on the carpet and ground it in with a boot heel.

“I want everybody out of the hotel—now.”

“But … but why?”

“Yes,” Bass echoed. “Why?”

“Because that’s the way I want it.” He drew a mouthful of smoke and let it dribble from the corner of his lips. “Are you going to get everybody down, or do you want me to do it?”

Henry Belding was a reasonable and patient man. Thirty-five years in the hotel business had equipped him to deal with all kinds of impatient and unreasonable people. The stranger was simply a guest who had made an impossible demand. He could be dealt with.

“Perhaps you don’t understand, sir. There are eight rooms being occupied at the moment, one of them on a permanent basis—the widow Lake has lived here since her husband passed away. This is her home. Now, you can’t expect these people just to … leave. I mean, where will they go?”

The stranger pointed his cigar toward the street. “They’ll go out.”

The reverend sighed. If obstinancy was a sin then this stranger was certainly a sinful man. Henry Belding was getting nowhere with reason, but faith could move mountains.

“Brother,” he intoned, laying a gentle hand on the stranger’s arm. “It would be an un-Christian act to send so many people out in the night.”

“I’m not your brother.”

The reverend smiled. “Ah, sir, we’re all brothers in the eyes of the good Lord. Brothers and sisters, each to the other.”

Matthew Bass was proud of his preaching skills and he could tell by the expression on the stranger’s face that he had touched a chord.

“You mean to say that all the folks in this hotel are your brothers and sisters?”

“They most certainly are!” His voice peeled like a church bell.

“I’m glad to hear that. Then you won’t mind if they all sleep at your house.”

He ground out his cigar on the desk top and strode past the flabbergasted preacher to the stairs.

“Wha … what are you going to do?” Belding said nervously.

“Clear out the hotel.”

“No! Please … sir. Let my wife and me do it. We … we’ll explain to the guests that … that …” His voice trailed off in misery. He could think of no possible explanation for the stranger’s actions. He stared blindly at the registry book, wondering what he would say to the people upstairs.

“I’m waiting, mister.”

Belding pressed stiff fingers against his temples. His head throbbed with suppressed anger. There was nothing he could do. The man had gone mad in his hotel and there was no one who could help him.

“I’ll tell my wife to … get started.” He walked slowly out from behind the desk, his eyes glassy. A beaten man.

The Reverend Bass looked at him with pity then turned furious eyes on the stranger. “I hope you’re satisfied with this night’s wickedness!”

The stranger sauntered away from the stairs and flopped into an overstuffed chair in a corner of the lobby. “The night isn’t over yet, Preacher. Give me your sermon in the morning.”

A crowd gathered to watch the exodus from Belding’s hotel. A few teamsters who had drifted down from the Silver Dollar found the sight funny, but most of the watching citizens were disturbed by it.

"I don't understand how you can let him do this," Ezra Malkin said to Sam Shaw.

"The mayor said he could have what he wanted—an' he wants the hotel."

"But, *why?"*

Shaw shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I reckon he likes bein' alone."

Ezra Malkin found the explanation disturbing and he expressed his feelings to Morgan Allen who stood at the edge of the crowd. Allen listened impassively.

"There may be a method to his madness, Ezra. I say we do just as he asks. When you run into a man who's used to having his own way, you give it to him—until he goes too far."

"I'd say he's gone about as far as he can go," said Ezra Malkin heatedly.

Morgan Allen smiled faintly. "We shall see, Ezra. We shall see."

The stranger sprawled in the chair, his long legs draped over the arm, and watched the confusion in the lobby with an air of detachment. The widow Lake was on the verge of hysterics at being forced out of her warm bed in the middle of the night, and a hardware drummer from Kansas City stood by the desk yelling for the manager. Henry Belding stayed wisely out of sight, but Sarah Belding moved among the departing guests giving aid, comfort, and sympathetic understanding. The frequent glances that she gave the stranger were ripe with resentment.

When the last complaining guest had been ushered through the door to the wagon that would take them to the reverend's house, Sarah Belding stormed into the lobby, her dark eyes blazing.

"The hotel is yours," she snapped, pausing in front of the stranger and glaring down at him. "I'll have Henry's and my things out in …"

"You and your husband are staying," he said. "I'm not living in a hotel without service."

She drew in her breath sharply. "We're not your servants."

He ignored the outburst. "You'll find my needs are simple. An occasional meal, and the bed changed every morning. I want a better room … on the top floor. Maybe the entire top floor … one big suite … parlor … bedroom."

"You won't need a bedroom," she hissed. "A man with your conscience would find sleep impossible!"

He smiled lazily. "Oh, I sleep just fine, ma'am. Any time you'd care to see first hand …"

She bent down and slapped him hard across the face. “You … you …” She found it impossible to find the right word and whirled away from him.

He swung his leg off the arm of the chair and stood up. “Hold it just a minute, Mrs. Belding. I’ll be having a guest for late supper. I’d appreciate your fixin’ something simple. Maybe a plate of fried chicken—and some wine if you have any.”

She had her back to him, her body a taut, angry line. “We’re teetotal. You can get your own liquor.”

“Whatever you say, ma’am. I don’t aim to cause any trouble.” He strolled to the door, pulled his hat low across his eyes and sauntered out into the night. As his footsteps faded across the porch, Sarah Belding ventured a glance over her shoulder. There was no hatred in her young face, only wonderment.

“They all gone, Sarah?”

Henry Belding peeped nervously from under the stairwell.

“Yes, Henry.” Her tone was frigid.

Belding came out, wiping his face with his shirt sleeve. “I heard what he said—about the suite. We’d better get started on it right away, Sarah.”

“And the chicken?”

“Yes … yes … fry up some chicken.”

“In other words, Henry, whatever this … this man wants we do.”

“Exactly.” His face was running with sweat and there was a wild look in his eyes. “It’s the price we have to pay.”

She frowned. “But why just us, Henry?”

He looked at her in amazement, then laughed hollowly. “Just us? Don’t worry, Sarah. I got a feeling he’s going to make the whole damn town pay!”

The stranger stood in the center of the street and watched the wagonload of guests lumber toward the church. The crowd had drifted away and only Mordecai Fortune remained. He sat perched on a hitching rail and looked like a misshapen owl in the darkness.

“You showed ’em,” he squeaked in his reedy voice. “You cleaned ’em out all right, all right.”

“Evenin’, Mordecai,” the stranger said.

Mordecai jumped down off the rail and waddled over to him. The top of his head reached the level of the tall man’s hip.

“I heard him. Clear as I heard you say, Evenin’, Mordecai.”

“Heard who?”

"Preacher Bass." He paused, giggling. "Oh, he's a great one for talkin' about God and *goodness.* He's always tellin' me to follow the path of *goodness."*

"What did he say, Mordecai?"

The dwarf grinned, revealing broad, yellowish teeth. "He told them people he wouldn't charge 'em more than they'd been payin' at the hotel. Oh, he's a smart man, that preacher."

"They were his brothers and sisters," said the stranger. He paused. "I'd like you to do something for me, Mordecai."

Mordecai took a step backward, his mouth open in surprise. "You *askin'* me, mister?"

"That's right."

The little man shook his head in wonder. "Nobody in this town ever *asked* me, mister. It's always, 'Mordecai, do this, an Mordecai, do that' … nobody ever *asked* me to do nothin'."

"I'm asking."

Mordecai hopped from foot to foot. "Anythin' … just name it Anythin' at all."

"Wine. A bottle of wine."

The dwarf rolled his eyes and chewed the tip of his thumb.

"I seen some wine—once. Yes, sir. I know I did. But where?"

"You'll remember, Mordecai," the stranger said, walking off. "Just put your mind to it."

Mordecai chewed frantically at his thumb. For the first time in his life he'd been *asked* to do something and he wanted desperately not to fail. Wine. He'd seen the bottles lying on a shelf, dusty, with big corks and fancy labels. Nobody drank wine in Lago, so it hadn't been at the Silver Dollar. He spun on his tiny heels and stared desperately at the dark buildings. Wine. Somewhere he had seen wine. He began to run up the street, like a hound sniffing an elusive trail.

Callie Travers studied her image in a mirror behind her dressing table, tilting her head from side to side and pouting her lips. There were times when Callie feared that her looks were fading, drying up in the desert wind, turning her into a wrinkled crone. To guard against that possibility, she spent an hour a day bathing her face with buttermilk and rubbing on creams. She was tired tonight and wondered if she dared do without the ritual. She had spent the evening with Dave Drake and he had done nothing but make idle and meaningless conversation. The man had been strained, tense, and his tension had been catching. Her head ached and all she wanted to do was to take off her clothes and go to bed. She gave one final reassuring look at the

condition of her skin, then started to unbutton her dress.

A door creaked. Callie Travers paid little attention to the sound. Her small house was at the edge of town, its front windows facing the mountains. She was accustomed to the winds that swept across the prairie to rattle her shutters and slam her doors. She wondered idly if she had forgotten to latch the front door when she came in, so she walked out of her bedroom and into the dark parlor.

The arm that slipped around her waist did not frighten her. The hand was strong, but it touched her side in a gentle caress. She turned quickly with a shout of joy.

"STACEY!"

The stranger faced her, smiling his amusement. "You'll have to wait a few days for Stacey Bridges, ma'am."

She broke from his grip with a scream of outrage and ran back into her bedroom, lunging toward a pistol which lay on a table by the bed. The stranger beat her to it, slapping the gun from the table and then kicking it across the room.

"Unh-uh, lady. You only get one chance—and you missed."

She swung at him, but he took hold of her wrists and forced her body against his.

"You're fightin' me and I don't want that. I just came by to invite you to supper."

"You're an animal," she said, spitting out the words. "I don't eat with dogs!"

He pulled her closer. "What if I was the dog that ran the pack?"

It wasn't an idle boast. She could sense his power. It flowed from his fingertips into her body and made her breathless. When he bent his head and kissed her on the lips she didn't resist.

It was humiliating to Sarah, and only the desperate urgings of her husband made her go through with it. It wasn't the cooking or the serving, she had done enough of that for various guests, it was just that she found these particular circumstances distasteful beyond belief.

"He has *that* woman upstairs!"

"I don't care if he has the devil himself up there," Henry Belding shouted. "Take that food up an' serve it."

"I ought to dump it on their heads!" She looked capable of doing just that and her husband made a clumsy but heartfelt attempt to placate her.

"Now, now, Sarah. Don't lose your temper. It's only going to be a

few days … just a few short days … an' then everything's going to be back to normal. And … I'll make it up to you."

She regarded him stonily. "How?"

He struggled for an idea. "Maybe … maybe that dress you liked. The one at the Emporium …?"

"It was sold. Mrs. Hobson bought it last week." She speared pieces of fried chicken from a pan of bubbling oil and slapped them on a platter.

Henry Belding waved his hands as though trying to pluck something of value from the air. "I'll think of something nice for you, Sarah. Don't you worry none about that. Something real nice."

"The only nice thing you could do for me, Henry, is to kick that painted hussy into the street—and him right along with her!"

"Now, Sarah …" he wailed, but she was out of the kitchen, holding the platter of chicken in front of her like a weapon.

Mordecai Fortune came bursting into the lobby as she climbed the stairs. He had two bottles clutched in his tiny fists and he nearly tripped in his eagerness to beat her to the third floor landing. When Sarah opened the door of the stranger's suite, Mordecai bounded in ahead of her like an eager puppy.

"Mordecai never forgets!" he squealed. "What I see I remember. I knew I'd seen wine … I *knew* it!"

The stranger sat at a table in the parlor facing Callie Travers. There was a clean white cloth on the table and the best silver service the hotel had to offer, the set that Henry only took out when bankers came to the hotel, or the judge. A candle burned gently in the darkness, giving the room a cosy glow.

Mordecai held the bottles above his head. "All the way from France. Says so right on the label … 'Bordux,' France." He placed them like an offering on the table.

"Thank you, Mordecai," the stranger said. He studied the labels and ignored the graceless way Sarah set down the platter of chicken.

"Do you have any special request for dessert?" Her voice was edgy with sarcasm.

"No," he said. "Miss Travers will take care of that for me, won't you, Miss Travers?"

Callie Travers smiled demurely, toying idly with a gold locket that plunged from view in the deep cleft of her bosom.

Sarah almost ran from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Mordecai looked bewildered. "What's the matter with Mrs. Belding?"

“She’s teetotal,” the stranger said blandly. “Can’t stomach the sight of wine.”

She was usually glad to get into bed after a long day and sleep would come to her almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, but not this night. She lay under the covers stiff as a post, staring at the ceiling.

“Henry?”

“What?” her husband grunted as he struggled out of his pants.

“Where did he come from?”

“How the hell do I know? Crawled out from under a rock, I s’pose, like any other rattler.”

He dumped his pants on a chair and padded over to the bed in his long, gray underwear.

“Is he a professional killer?”

“Has to be—the way he cleaned out those three in the saloon. The way he sits here waitin’ for three more. A killer. Undertakers like Caleb get rich just walking his trail.” He climbed into bed and rolled heavily onto his side, turning his back on his wife.

“I don’t like it,” she whispered. “He frightens me. Don’t let him stay here, Henry. Please.”

Henry Belding yawned. “That’s fool talk, Sarah, and you know it. Let him frighten Stacey and the Carlin boys. That’s all I care about.”

Yes, she thought bitterly, that was all anybody cared about. Her eyes burned. Two floors above her the stranger sat, drinking wine with Callie Travers. Or had they finished the wine by now? If so, what were they doing? Her hand brushed her husband’s back but he did not respond. He lay beside her like a lump of clay. She stifled a groan and turned her head restlessly on the pillow, straining to penetrate the darkness, to see the unseeable. A tinkle of laughter echoed through the empty floors. A tiny sound, almost lost in the sigh of the wind and the creaking of shutters and doors. She pressed her hands tightly to her ears, but she could still hear it—the joyous laughter of a woman.

“God,” she whispered. “Please send him away.”

Chapter VI

They rode into the dawn, crossing the salt flats of the upper Verde, giving Fort Bannister a wide berth and heading into the dry foothills of the Jicarillas. They spurred their mounts till blood and foam caked their hides. They rode them to their knees, and Dan Carlin's pinto mare to her death.

"Goddamn," Dan Carlin cursed, swinging his leg clear as the mare toppled to her side. "What the hell do I do, Stace?"

"Shoot her," Bridges said dismounting from his staggering roan. "It ain't right to let a horse suffer."

Dan Carlin drew his Colt and knelt by the mare's head, placing the muzzle of the pistol in the depression behind the ear. He fired one round and the pinto stiffened and lay still.

"Damn! What the hell do I do now, Stace?"

"You walk," Bridges said. "What the hell do you think you do!"

Bridges squinted toward the rising sun. The salt flats stretched for miles in empty whiteness. Nothing marred the crisp surface except the hoof marks of their horses. A blind man could have followed their tracks.

"There'll be a posse formin' after they find them bodies back there."

Cole Carlin studied the arroyos ahead of them.

"I know this country, Stace. Me an old Drango ran a herd through here four years ago. We hid 'em in a canyon about ten miles north 'til the owner stopped lookin' fer us."

Bridges spat in the dust. "Any water in that canyon?"

"Some … alkali, but not too bad. Didn't kill the beasts—or us, neither."

Bridges ran a hand across the trembling flank of his horse. "We got no choice but to rest up a day. Dan can ride double with you till we pick up some fresh animals."

"Lots of ranches around Big Springs," Cole said.

"Yeah, and lots of lawmen, too," Dan added grimly.

"The lawman ain't been born who'll stop me," Bridges said fiercely. "Not before I get back to Lago."

"You sure are anxious to get home, ain't you, Stace?" Dan Carlin said.

"Ain't you?"

"Yeah … sure. There's one or two folks I'd like to see crawl."

Bridges drew his lips back into a tight snarl. "They'll crawl all right … them that ain't too dead to move!"

He grabbed the reins of his horse and led it up the arroyo, keeping to the hard shale so as to leave no tracks. Far above the arroyo buzzards wheeled in the pale sky, waiting for the men to leave, waiting to soar down to the dead horse.

They stood in a ragged line in the morning sun, thirteen good men of Lago—and Mordecai Fortune. They stood in the street in front of Ezra Malkin's feed store with guns in their hands. The stranger walked slowly in front of them, stopping every now and then to inspect a particularly interesting weapon.

"What do you call that thing?" he asked Johnny Wade.

The stableboy frowned and held out his gun. "It's a shotgun, mister."

"No, son." The stranger shook his head. "That's a bean shooter. You hunt little tiny birds with a gun like that, so you don't mess up their feathers."

"It's the only gun I got," the boy muttered.

"Then it'll have to do—for now."

He continued his slow way, past every man in the line, past Old Dragoon Colts; a Sharps buffalo gun in the hands of little Asa Goodwin; a rusty Winchester with a broken sight on the shoulder of Titus Anderson; and shotguns of many bores, most of them light. Only Thaddeus Brown, the gunsmith, held a weapon of any power and accuracy, a Smith & Wesson .44 caliber double-action revolver. Mordecai Fortune had no weapon at all.

"Well," said the stranger lamely, "I'm glad so many of you turned out this morning."

"I passed the word," Caleb Bowen shouted proudly. "When the mayor speaks, the people follow."

The stranger did not acknowledge the interruption.

"None of you folks want to get shot. You don't want your shops or your homes burned down. You don't want your women touched. You don't want *anything* to happen."

"That's right, mister," Jason Hobart cried out.

The stranger pointed a finger at the portly, bald-headed owner of the Emporium. "All of you feel the way he does, but you're afraid to do anything about it. Or maybe you just don't know how."

"That's more like it, mister," Titus Anderson said stoutly. "Like I

told you yesterday, there ain't nothin' wrong with our guts!"

There was a chorus of agreement and the stranger waited patiently until the uproar subsided. "All right, then. Let's get on with it. The first thing I want to see is how good you people shoot, and then …"

"I don't have a gun," Mordecai wailed. "I asked, but nobody'd give me one."

The biggest man in Lago was Pete Moody, an aging giant and the town's only blacksmith. He stood next to Mordecai and the effect was ludicrous. Pete Moody laughed at the dwarf's plight and held out his shotgun, a monstrous double-barreled stage driver's gun that was longer than Mordecai was tall.

"Here, little man," he boomed. "Fire this an' it'll buck you clear to Texas!"

The men laughed, but Mordecai's feelings were hurt and he stepped angrily out of the line and walked up to the stranger with tears in his eyes.

"They're just foolin' with me. They won't give me a gun. But I can shoot a pistol, mister. I swear to God I can. I can hit …"

"A barn door at two paces!" Pete Moody roared.

All of the men joined in the laughter and the stranger waited patiently until it had subsided.

"We'll see if the rest of you can shoot any better."

Mordecai tugged at his sleeve. "Do I get a gun, mister?"

The stranger thought about it, then shook his head. "I got a more important job for you, Mordecai. I need two wagons and a team of mules. And I want three dummies."

"Dummies?"

"Yes … dummies. Get some old clothes, stuff 'em with straw and rags. Stuff 'em tight, now. I want 'em to be as big as a grown man. Think you can do all that, Mordecai—or is it too much for you?"

Mordecai puffed out his chest. "Nothings too much for me, mister!"

"Okay. Then get on with it."

Mordecai ran up the street and the stranger turned back to the assembled men. Thirteen citizens, the decent folk of Lago, most of them elderly and running to seed. He motioned for Sam Shaw to step out of the line.

"Is this it?" he said quietly.

Shaw nodded. "They may not look like much, but they're eager. They all got a lot to lose an' they're willin' to fight to keep it."

"They weren't so eager yesterday."

The marshal shifted a cold cigar from one side of his mouth to the

other. “They had a night to think it over. They’ll do what you want.”

The stranger looked down at the pistol in the marshal’s belt—an unwieldy Starr .45, the long barrel flecked with rust.

“The gunsmith must starve in this town.”

Shaw placed a big hand over the Starr as though to hide it from view.

“Well, he don’t get much business from us. It’s Drake and Allen mostly. They arm their drivers pretty damn good. Anyone crazy enough to bushwhack one of them ore shipments would get a helluva surprise.”

The stranger narrowed his eyes and looked at the row of men.

“I don’t see any teamsters here this morning.”

Shaw looked uncomfortable. “Well, I tried. I asked Dave Drake to send over a few of his sharpshooters, like Johnny Rule an’ Al Bisby, but he said he couldn’t spare anybody.”

“Maybe he doesn’t have anything to lose.”

“Maybe,” the marshal said lamely.

The stranger turned sharply away and walked toward the rest of the men. “All right, let’s get on with it. The church is the dead line so let’s get down there and set up our positions. Mister Mayor, move ’em out.”

Caleb Bowen swung smartly out of line, throwing his light fowling piece to his shoulder with all the snap of a guardsman.

“Comp’ny! Forward—ho!” He strutted down the street toward the church, the others trailing along behind him, a ragged, out-of-step line.

The stranger sighed. It was, he felt sure, going to be a long day.

The Reverend Bass came out of his church just as Caleb Bowen ordered the men to halt and lower their arms. He appeared slightly bewildered by the activity and stayed in the shadow of the building until he saw the stranger walk up, then he scurried into the street, his face a tight mask of disapproval.

“May I ask what you’re doing?”

The stranger was looking thoughtfully at the empty belfry. “There should be a bell up there.”

The reverend’s jaw dropped and his heart raced. “A bell? Yes … yes, there should indeed be a bell there. What’s a church without a bell?”

The stranger turned to Sam Shaw. “Who has the sharpest eyes in town, Marshal?”

“Johnny Rule—I guess. I mean, he’s the youngest. Just stands to reason.”

“All right,” the stranger said. “Johnny Rule goes in the belfry as lookout. When he spots dust he rings a bell to warn the others. But there isn’t any bell.”

“A sad commentary,” said the reverend fervidly. “The only house of God within two hundred heathen miles, and no bell.”

“You’ll get a bell,” the stranger said firmly.

The reverend beamed, clasping his hands together in thanks to his Maker.

“A bronze bell, deep-throated, calling the faithful …”

“What kind of bell can you rustle up, Marshal?” the stranger asked.

Shaw scratched the side of his jaw with a fingernail. “There’s a donkey locomotive on the narrow gauge up at number four diggings. It’s got a bell. I reckon I could get it for you.”

“A donkey locomotive?” The reverend’s voice was a gasp of disbelief. “A *donkey* bell in *my* church?”

“A bell’s a bell,” the stranger replied, not looking at him. “Go and get it, Marshal.”

The reverend’s hands fluttered like falling leaves. “But … but that won’t do at all! A church bell should have dignity … spiritual *tone.”* He pointed at the pristine whiteness of the tower. “I won’t stand for my church sounding like a *train!”*

The stranger turned his head slowly and fixed him with his hawk’s eyes. “Do you want it to sound like a burning building, Preacher?”

“No … no, of course not,” the reverend stammered.

“These men who are coming. Are they God-fearing members of your congregation?”

Matthew Bass felt himself wilting under the hard eyes. He wiped a trickle of sweat from his face and mouthed the word, “No.”

“All right then. We need a bell up there to warn the town … to get the men ready in plenty of time. Otherwise …” He left the consequences unsaid.

“I understand. Go … right ahead with your plans. If I can be of any help …”

But the stranger was no longer listening. He was walking toward the high fence on the opposite side of the street, motioning several men to follow.

The stranger surveyed the fence line. It was a good fence of stout, unpainted boards, screening from the street the workshop where Caleb Bowen made his coffins and grave markers. He kicked three boards loose at five-foot intervals while the men who had followed him looked on soberly.

"You want the boards loose but not out," he said. "When you get the signal to fire you push the boards down and open up."

The men said nothing. Thaddeus Brown held his well-oiled Smith & Wesson in his right hand, barrel pointed toward the ground.

The stranger eyed it dubiously. "Might as well put that away. I want three men over here with large bore scatterguns."

Brown raised the pistol slightly. "I'm good with this."

"At a moving object? They might come by this point at a gallop. Don't you have a shotgun in your store?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Then fetch it—and if you have any to spare, bring 'em back with you. We can use all the decent guns we can get."

The gunsmith stiffened. "I made the offer—any gun in my stock at a fair discount. That's as far as I'm prepared to go."

"Suit yourself, mister. This is your town, not mine."

The stranger turned to the other men and selected Pete Moody and a small, gray haired man by the name of Calvin Morton who ran the assay office. Morton carried a double-barreled shotgun, the barrels cut down to the fore-end grip—an under-the-counter weapon, deadly at close range.

"All right, men. This is your post along with Mister Brown. Hide behind the fence and when you hear the signal to fire you shove the boards down and start shooting. Aim for the riders and cut 'em right off their mounts."

The men stared at him, pale-faced and sweating.

There was no way up to the belfry from inside the church, so a ladder had to be brought from the Emporium to gain access to the roof. Young Johnny Wade went first, climbing without fear, up the ladder to the slanting roof, then along the drain gutter to the belfry tower. He carried a coil of manila rope slung over one shoulder. Pulling himself up into the belfry, he paused to gaze down at the town and the encircling land.

"Hey!" he shouted. "You can see for a hundred miles, I bet."

"Just lower the rope," the stranger shouted back. "We got a little bit of work to do, boy."

The rope snaked down and the stranger tied two rifles and a shotgun to it. "Haul 'em up!"

As the bundle of firearms jerked upwards, banging and scraping against the side of the building, Caleb Bowen watched nervously.

"Who … who's goin' up there besides Johnny?"

"Who are the best rifle shots?" the stranger asked.

"Titus Anderson," Bowen said quickly. "Titus and Jack Hobson."

"Hell," the barber grunted, "I ain't as good as you, Caleb. You're always braggin' about how sharp you are with a thirty-thirty."

The undertaker held up his quail gun and scowled at the barber. "Does this look like a rifle to you, Titus? Does it?"

"You're good with a Winchester," Anderson said doggedly. "And you damn well know it."

Bowen stared upward. Fleecy white clouds raced the wind and the belfry tower appeared to be revolving around them, spiraling toward the sky. He closed his eyes.

"Maybe. Maybe I'm good with a rifle—but I ain't good at climbing roofs."

"You won't have to climb," the stranger said dryly. "We'll haul you up on the rope."

Bowen shuddered. "On a … rope?"

Titus Anderson spat contemptuously. "It won't be around your neck, Caleb. Great God almighty, you're the *mayor.* You're supposed to be a *leader."*

The little undertaker bristled angrily and tilted his silk hat to a cocky angle. "All right, Titus. I'll go, but you're goin right along with me."

"Maybe I will an' maybe I won't," Anderson shouted. "I ain't made up my mind yet."

The stranger left them standing toe to toe and led the rest of the men up the street toward Ezra Malkin's feed store. An empty ore wagon stood across the street in front of Pete Moody's blacksmith shop. The rear end of the wagon had been jacked up and one of the big iron-bound wheels was missing. The stranger paused in the center of the street.

"You need a barricade of hay bales in front of the feed store, coming out at an angle from the sidewalk." He pointed at the ore dray. "Dump that wagon on its side to make another barricade. That'll narrow the street some. They'll have to ride between them—if they get this far."

Joe Hatch frowned and exchanged a brief look with Henry Belding.

"Maybe we oughta ask Dave Drake first. That's one of his wagons."

"Dump it now and ask later," the stranger said. "Time's running out on you people. If you ain't ready, the men who are coming won't wait until you are. So get on with it, pile up those hay bales … drop that wagon on its side and take your positions."

The man's voice had the ring of command and there was no

questioning what he had to say. The hay bales were dragged from the back of Malkin's store and the big wagon was rocked off the jack and dumped into the street, to fall on its side with a splintering crash.

Sam Shaw brought the bell, a twelve-inch diameter brass bell, green with age.

"Drake's furious," the marshal said to the stranger as they watched the bell being hauled up the side of the church by Johnny Wade. "He's up at the diggings an' just as mad as a wet cat. He says two of his wagons and a team of mules are missing and he didn't take kindly to my making off with his bell."

The stranger grinned and pointed up the street. "He can stop worrying about his wagons and team. They seem to be in good hands."

Mordecai Fortune sat high on the wagon seat, his legs dangling a long way from the floorboard. He had six big mules in harness and they pulled the empty ore wagon easily, despite the added strain of a second wagon rumbling along in tow. The dwarf drove to the front of the church and then stood up on the seat to haul on the reins.

"Whoa mules! Whoa!"

He shrieked his delight when the mules did as they were told, then turned his beaming smile on the stranger.

"I did it! I told you I'd do it, didn't I? Mordecai can do anything!"

He was crowing like a banty rooster.

"And the dummies?" the stranger asked.

"In the back wagon. Three of the best dummies you ever saw! Straw and rags and clay pots for heads. Moredecai knows how to do things right!"

The stranger tipped his hat in appreciation, then turned to Shaw.

"Give him a hand, Sam. Put some boards across the trailer wagon and tie the dummies on 'em. Then move the rig out of town and wait for the signal."

"Okay, mister. Whatever you say."

They were set to the stranger's satisfaction. Caleb Bowen, a little green around the mouth, was up in the belfry along with Johnny Wade and Titus Anderson. The giant blacksmith, Thaddeus Brown, and Calvin Morton were well hidden behind the fence with their shotguns. Joe Hatch, Asa Goodwin, Henry Belding, and Jack Hobson stood behind the overturned wagon with shotguns and rifles, and Ezra Malkin knelt in the street with Jason Hobart, the two elderly merchants well protected by a bastion of hay bales. There were enough armed men to destroy an infantry platoon if it were foolish enough to blunder into

such a trap.

"You men ready?" he yelled. There were a few scattered cries of "Yes," but the response was thin and hesitant. The stranger removed his hat and waved it, signaling Shaw and Mordecai to start the wagons rolling back to town. "Ring the bell," he shouted, "let's hear how she sounds."

Johnny Wade had tied the bell to a crosspiece of thick timber, a support constructed for a far more noble instrument. He gave the bell a push and it clanged brightly. The sound carried well, but it made Matthew Bass sick at heart. He stepped away from the open church door and looked toward the belfry.

The stranger walked over to him. "Better get out of the way, Preacher. There may be some stray lead flying around in a minute or two."

The reverend stabbed a trembling finger toward the sky.

"Have them direct their bullets up there! Have them shoot that damned *railway* clanger from God's house!"

The stranger squinted at the belfry and the waiting men. "I reckon the Lord'll forgive you, Preacher. Just tell Him the devil's coming to town and you need to warn your flock."

The reverend's glance was baleful as he stalked back into the church and slammed the door.

"FIRE!"

The stranger cupped both hands to his mouth and let the word blare out like a trumpet call. He stood with his back to the hay bales watching Mordecai and Sam Shaw bring the ore wagon up the street. The wagon with the three dummies perched on it trailed along behind them at the end of ten yards of stout rope. From the distance, the dummies looked real. Mordecai had stuffed new clothing—filched from the Emporium—and had placed spanking white hats on top of the clay pots he had used for heads. They could have been Stacey Bridges and the Carlin brothers riding into town on a wooden rail. The trailer wagon was abreast of the fence and directly below the belfry tower but nothing was happening.

"FIRE! … GODDAMNIT! FIRE!"

A single rifle cracked from the belfry and dust spurted up ten feet behind the wagon. Another rifle banged from the tower and a sliver of wood flew from the side of the wagon.

"THAT'S IT! SHOOT! SHOOT!"

The fence boards fell into the road and two shotguns went off almost in unison. The stranger could see Pete Moody and Calvin

Morton standing in the gaps, working their weapons. Thaddeus Brown was nowhere to be seen. The shotguns exploded again and a spray of wood whirled into the air from the wagon, but the dummies rode serene.

One final bang from the belfry. A bullet slapped the road and whined off in ricochet, then the wagon was past and rumbling up to the gap between the hay bales and the overturned ore dray.

The stranger stepped behind the barricade and waited until the dummies were in dead close range.

"FIRE!"

He couldn't see what effect the men behind the dray were having, but he could see how Ezra Malkin and Jason Hobart were shooting. Both men had ducked behind the hay, pointed their guns in the general direction of the wagon and fired blindly. There was an answering volley of shots from across the way and the stranger could hear the hum of bullets and the whistle of buckshot far above his head.

"CEASE FIRE!"

The sudden stillness was painful. He stood up slowly. The trailer wagon was square in the gap, not fifteen feet from either ambush point. Not one dummy had so much as a hole in its shirt or a mark on its hat.

"You call that shooting?"

He strode angrily away from the barricade. All of the men were coming out from their positions and he could see the three men in the belfry leaning over, peering down with great interest.

"Don't strain yourselves looking, you didn't hit anything," he shouted up to them. "Why didn't you just *throw* your guns at the wagon!"

The men from behind the fence stood shamefaced, staring down at their feet, waiting for him to hurl his contempt at them.

"What was the matter, Mister Brown? Afraid to soil your shotgun?"

"I … I forgot to take the safety off."

The stranger raised both hands in exasperation and turned to face the six men at the barricades. They looked as downcast and contrite as those at the fence.

"You men ever hear of *aiming?* Christ, you can't hit what you can't see!"

Mordecai Fortune stood up on the seat of the lead wagon, his face flushed with excitement.

"Show 'em, mister! Go ahead an' show 'em."

The stranger hesitated for a moment, then his lean body jerked forward into a half crouch and his right hand dropped in a blur of movement to his side. No one saw the Colt come out of the holster or saw his stiff left hand fan the hammer. All anyone saw were the three dummies dissolving into splattered cloth and flying straw and clay pots whirling from the flailed torsos. The pots smashed on the ground and the big white hats that had been on them rolled down the street like hoops.

The sound of the shots took a long time to stop bouncing between the buildings. When the final echo faded away a strident voice replaced it.

"You damn fools! Who the hell said you could shoot my wagon full of holes?"

Dave Drake swung off his chestnut mare and walked quickly to the lead wagon. He shook his fist at Sam Shaw, his dark, handsome face distorted by rage.

"What the goddamn hell is going on, Sam? I don't recall lending that rig."

The marshal shrugged helplessly.

"He said he needed it."

"He did, did he?"

Drake looked at the straw dummies dissolving in the wind, and at the tall man with the smoking Colt. Some of his anger faded.

"We pay the marshal for protection, mister." His voice was a chill.

"Pay him a little more," the stranger said evenly. "Maybe he can buy himself a decent gun."

Drake opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. His eyes were pinpricks of rage as he looked up at Sam Shaw.

"The council didn't say anything about vigilantes. They said that … *gunslinger* could stick around, maybe help some, but it's your job to keep the peace—*Marshal."*

Sam Shaw chewed the thought over. He glanced at the badge on his shirt as though wondering how it got there. "It *was* my job, Dave." He unpinned the badge, held it in the palm of his hand for a moment then tossed it to the stranger.

"Here, mister—and good luck to you."

The badge spun in the air like a silver coin and the stranger caught it. He held it by the point of one star and read the wording, then placed it slowly, almost tenderly, in the pocket of his shirt.

Chapter VII

The sun cast no shadows as they led the horses over the rimrock toward the narrow canyon below. Stacey Bridges looked back at the tumbled waste of rock that stretched for miles down the slope of the mountains and ended abruptly at the fringe of the salt flats. From the height of the rim the flats looked like a lake of white water with nothing to mar its pristine surface, but Bridges had seen a vague movement on its western edge.

"We got comp'ny," he said.

Cole Carlin handed the reins of his horse to Dan and cupped his hands across his forehead to shield the sun from his eyes. He stared down at the flats for a long time, then nodded.

"Six of 'em. Not much of a posse."

"Enough. How long before they get here?"

Cole spat on the rocks. "Never. They won't pick up our tracks. They'll just move around the mountain an' head for Big Springs."

"That's what I figured. We'll hole up here a spell then backtrack and head south. We can pick up the Lago road beyond Carson Forks—pick up some fresh horses, too."

Cole scratched the sweaty stubble of his beard. "How long you figure before we get home?"

"Sundown tomorrow if our luck holds." He grinned evilly. "But I wouldn't call Lago home. No, sir, I'd call Lago a graveyard—the biggest buryin' ground in the territory!"

He laughed harshly and pointed toward the sky. "Look up there, Cole. Buzzards! By God, they're smart birds. They know who to follow for a good meal. Yes, sir. They sure as hell know who to follow!"

His laughter echoed off the walls of the canyon as the vultures flew lazy circles in the copper sky.

Mordecai Fortune climbed down from the high seat of the wagon and jumped to the ground, landing heavily on his hands and knees. The stranger bent over and helped him to his feet.

"Thank you—*Marshal!"* the dwarf said, dusting himself off.

"My pleasure, Mordecai." He was looking at the bullet scars along the side of the wagon. Everyone had fired low—or high enough to hit the pigeons on the feed store roof.

“They don’t shoot so good, do they?” said Mordecai.

“Not near good enough.”

“Their hearts aren’t in it. That’s why. They’re hopin’ the trouble’ll just go away. But it won’t. Trouble never does that. It never goes away on its own.”

The stranger scratched the side of his nose with his thumb. “That’s a real deep thought. Let’s you and me go to the saloon and talk about trouble. You a whiskey drinker, Mordecai?”

“I am and I ain’t.” The little man removed his hat and ran a hand through his thick, curly hair. His head seemed far too big for his tiny neck to support. “That is, I like whiskey, but Joe won’t never serve it to me.”

“Maybe he thinks you’re an Indian.”

Mordecai laughed so hard he nearly lost his balance. The stranger placed a hand on his shoulder to keep him up and then steered him toward the Silver Dollar.

Men lined the bar, drinking silently, each lost in his own thoughts. The first table by the door was stacked high with rifles and shotguns. The Lago town militia had called it a day.

The stranger found space at the bar, lifting Mordecai up and setting him on the counter, facing the room.

“Whiskey,” he said. “For me and my friend here.”

Joe Hatch looked dubious. “Mordecai don’t drink whiskey.”

“Pour,” he said.

Joe poured.

Caleb Bowen stood at the bar next to him. He looked up from his beer, his face wreathed in gloom.

“We tried, mister. That’s all I can say.”

The stranger patted him on the back. “Sure you did, an’ you just keep tryin’.”

Hatch’s mouth settled in tight-lipped disapproval as he watched the stranger. The dwarf grasped his glass eagerly and downed the contents in one gulp.

The stranger slapped the bar again. “Barkeep—pour. For everybody.”

Ezra Malkin peered glumly down the bar. “What have we got to celebrate, mister?”

The stranger took the badge from his shirt pocket and held it up to the light.

“Seeing as how you folks told me I could have any damn thing I wanted in this town, I’ve decided to make a couple of changes.”

"Changes?" said Caleb Bowen. "What kind of changes?"

"A new marshal to begin with—and then a new mayor."

The undertaker swallowed hard but said nothing.

The stranger reached out and pinned the badge to the dwarf's shirt.

"I hereby appoint Mordecai Fortune town marshal of Lago, and …" He paused to remove the high silk hat from Caleb Bowen's head and placed it in Mordecai's lap. "… its mayor. Try the hat on for size, Mordecai."

Caleb Bowen spluttered in protest. "Now just hold on a minute!"

The stranger looked at him with a face of steel. "You objecting to my choice, mister?"

Bowen stared into eyes that drilled him to the bone. He felt a sudden pang of fear and looked hastily away.

"No … no, of course not. Do whatever you think best for the town."

"That's the way to look at things," the stranger said. "What I do, I do for the town. So let's all drink to Mordecai Fortune, marshal *and* mayor of Lago!"

Joe Hatch passed out the whiskey and everybody drank.

Mordecai Fortune felt strange. He felt happy, and yet he felt sad. He rocked merrily on top of the bar, kicking his heels against the side, swilling whiskey just like everybody else. He was mayor—and he was town marshal. The stranger had said so and everybody was drinking to it. Ezra Malkin and Jack Hobson were drinking. Caleb Bowen and Henry Belding were drinking. So were Jason Hobart and Titus Anderson—all drinking to his good health and his long life. But none of them were smiling. Their faces were gaunt, filled with suspicion and hate. Mordecai poured himself another whiskey and gulped it down. His head swam and there was a great burning in his stomach. It was the whiskey. Now he knew why Joe never gave him anything but beer to drink. Whiskey went to his head and made his belly burn. It made his thoughts fly in a thousand different directions at the same time.

Town marshal. Just like Sam Shaw and Jim Duncan. He didn't want to think about Jim Duncan, but his eyes were drawn to the silver badge on his chest. He stared down at it blindly, not seeing it there at all, not on his chest. He saw the badge lying in the street where it had fallen after … after …

An icy sweat popped out on his forehead and ran in thin streams down his face. He wanted to wipe his face but his arms felt too heavy to move. That was how it had been with Jim Duncan. His arms had been too heavy to move, that was why he had lain so still. And the

people had stared at Duncan just as they were staring now. Ezra Malkin and Jack Hobson. Caleb Bowen and Henry Belding. Jason Hobart and Titus Anderson. Pete Moody and Thaddeus Brown. All staring into the street from around drawn blinds, or standing in the shadows behind half-closed doors. Watching, saying nothing.

The dwarf clamped his eyes shut and felt tears well up behind the lids, hot and burning. He wanted to raise his hands and pluck the badge from his shirt. The badge was Jim Duncan's. He wanted to take the badge and give it back to him. Only Jim Duncan was a long time dead. A long time buried. Up on the hill at the edge of town. Six feet under a plain wood cross.

God! God! God!

He balled his tiny fists and struck blindly at his chest, feeling his knuckles rap against the tin star. They'd killed him—rode up on him out of the darkness with their whips coiled on the saddle horses. Dark riders on dark horses. Shadow men, coming at the gallop to ring Jim Duncan in the center of the street, to catch him in a patch of moonlight.

God! God! God!

And he had done nothing. He had lain silent as a log under the porch step of Hobson's store and watched the bullwhips crack and the blood fly. He had done nothing but pray for a gun and a six-foot body. He had done nothing but hide his head and whimper as the terrible whips snapped in the cold night air. The whips had torn the life out of Jim Duncan's body and ripped the silver-plated badge from his bloody shirt.

Mordecai Fortune opened his eyes and blinked back the tears. He stared at the faces of Caleb Bowen, Henry Belding, Jason Hobart, Titus Anderson, Pete Moody, Thaddeus Brown, Ezra Malkin, and Jack Hobson—and his eyes were terrible. They were the eyes of doom.

"HA HA HA HA HA!" Caleb Bowen tilted his back and brayed his laughter to the ceiling. "Yes, sir. I can go along with a joke as well as any man. Mordecai as marshal *and* mayor. Yes. That's rich, it's a good joke." He paused to slug back a whiskey. "The little man has my blessing. He has, indeed." But he walked out of the saloon without giving it. One by one the other men followed him.

"I want a gun," Mordecai said thickly. "If … if I'm marshal like you say, then I should have a gun … a big pistol with … with ivory grips." He reached for the bottle but Joe Hatch moved it out of his way.

"You've had enough, Mordecai."

The dwarf glared at him but didn't object. The stranger lifted him down from the bar and he didn't object to that either. "All right Mordecai. Let's go get you a pistol—with ivory grips."

Mordecai headed for the door, staggering slightly. The whiskey made his legs rubbery and his head spin. He wanted to get to the street before retching on the saloon floor.

Joe Hatch took an angry wipe at the bar with a wet towel.

"I don't want the little fellow gettin' hurt mister."

The stranger finished his whiskey and set the glass on the bar top.

"Who'd want to hurt him?"

"That ain't for me to say. But he's got to live in this town and you don't. Certain people won't cotton to the idea of him struttin' around with a badge on his chest."

"They'll get used to it."

The bartender shook his head dourly. "Maybe they will and maybe they won't. This town's always been hell on its marshals."

"So I've heard."

The stranger nodded curtly and walked to the door. Joe Hatch watched him leave, his eyes deeply troubled.

Thaddeus Brown's gunshop was in a small building next to the Emporium. There was a single display case against one wall, racks of shotguns and rifles against the other, and a workshop in the back. A dozen new Colt .45's were laid out in the display case along with a varied assortment of Smith & Wesson double-action pistols and two or three big, ungainly Starrs. Mordecai Fortune had to stand on his toes to peer over the edge of the case, and his eyes bulged at the sight of the polished weapons.

"That's what I want!" he cried, tapping a finger against the glass. "Those two over there … the silver ones with the ivory grips."

Thaddeus Brown was taking new Winchester carbines from a wooden crate and stacking them on the wall rack. He had paid little attention to Mordecai and the stranger when they had first walked into his place. He assumed the stranger needed a box of shells and he wasn't in any great hurry to serve him. But the dwarf's words made him pause in his work.

"What did he say?"

The stranger tapped the case with his knuckles. "He said he's found what he wants—those nickel-plated Frontiers with the ivory grips."

"He wants them?" said Brown incredulously. "Mordecai?"

"He's the marshal."

Brown forced a laugh. "But … I thought that was only a joke."

"It was a joke to Mister Bowen. It isn't a joke to Mordecai." His smile was thin, almost deadly. "And it isn't a joke to me."

Brown coughed nervously. “No. I can see that. Well … you say he’s chosen a pistol?”

“He’s chosen *two* pistols.”

“The silver ones.” Mordecai shrieked. “The silver ones with the ivory grips!”

Brown walked slowly over to the display case, his lips drawn tightly across his teeth in a frigid grin. “They’re a bit big for your hands, Mordecai.”

“He’ll manage,” the stranger said.

Thaddeus Brown unlocked the case, removed the two Colts and handed them to the dwarf. He took them with trembling hands and pointed them toward the street. His fingers barely reached the triggers.

“They’re beautiful,” he said in awe. “And I want holsters to go with ’em—and lots of bullets.”

“Anything else … Marshal?” Brown sneered.

The stranger gave him a hard look. “Just one more thing. The marshal isn’t happy about today’s shooting. He thinks everyone would do better if they had a better gun—like one of those new carbines. Pass ’em out.”

The gunsmith turned ashen. “Pass … them out?”

“That’s right. One free gun and a box of shells to every man in Lago.”

“But … that’s new stock. Who’s going to pay me back?”

The stranger clucked his tongue. “Why, sir, you’ll get the thanks of the town. That should be payment enough. What do you think, Mordecai?”

“More than enough,” Mordecai said as he swung the heavy revolvers toward another target.

Thaddeus Brown was beaten and he knew it. He took two well-oiled holsters from a shelf, filled the loops with ammunition and handed them silently to the dwarf.

The stranger tipped his hat. “Much obliged. Been nice doin’ business with you.”

“Sure,” Brown said, speaking with great difficulty. “A real pleasure.”

The stranger led Mordecai into the street. The little man wore the two gunbelts draped across his chest like bandoleers, the holsters with their shiny guns dangling almost to his knees. He strutted as tall as he could, proud as a peacock.

“Howdy, *Marshal!”* Johnny Wade called out cheerfully. He was leading two horses into the barnlike entrance to Pete Moody’s

blacksmith shop for shoeing.

"Howdy, Johnny," the dwarf squealed happily.

Pete Moody was pumping the bellows on the forge and he paused to eye the dwarf up and down. "You look right professional, Mordecai," he said.

Mordecai puffed out his chest. "It's the guns what do it. I bet these are the best guns in the territory."

"They're handsome weapons," the blacksmith agreed.

The stranger leaned casually against a door post. "There are some new Winchester carbines over at the gunsmith's, free to all comers. Get yourself one. Maybe it'll improve your aim."

Moody frowned and looked down at his hands. "I dunno, mister. My hands just don't fit the tools of killin'."

"Better with a hammer, are you?"

"Yes, sir," the blacksmith said proudly. "I could make shoes for a horsefly."

"How about carpentry? Know anything about building with wood?"

Moody glanced at young Wade. "Some. Me and Johnny here do a bit of fixin' from time to time."

"Do you think you could build me some tables—big ones, where maybe eight, ten people could sit down together?"

"Like at a church picnic?" Johnny Wade asked.

"Something like that," the stranger said.

Moody gave the forge another pump. "I reckon we could do it if we had the planks. Lumber's mighty scarce."

The stranger glanced at the big ore dray which still lay on its side in the road.

"There's enough lumber there to get started. You could build a fine table from that old wagon."

Moody ran a dirt-streaked hand across his jaw. "That ain't exactly an old wagon. That's one of the Drake-Allen rigs. I was bindin' new iron to the wheel is all. Dave wouldn't take kindly to our bustin' it up."

"I'll handle Dave Drake," the stranger said. "Go ahead and start." He looked up and down the street. "Any more of them handy?"

Pete Moody jerked a thumb toward the rear of his shop. "Four of 'em parked out back. I'd been workin' on the axles."

"Break 'em up, too. That'll give you enough planks."

"Okay, mister," Moody said. "We'll do it but, I'll tell you right now, Dave Drake's goin' to split a gut."

Mordecai Fortune trailed along in the stranger's shadow. He felt grand with the guns and the tall silk hat. Marshal *and* mayor of Lago. A person of importance—even if so far there had been nothing for him to do. He didn't know what the stranger had in mind and he didn't dare ask. He was content to be with the stranger and he didn't want to run the risk of making him angry by asking questions. Still, he felt useful. He knew the town and its people and he could sense their moods. When he spotted Dave Drake storm out of his office followed by five of his teamsters he knew there was trouble in the wind. He hurried to catch up with the stranger and tug at his belt.

"Behind you, mister. Dave Drake's on the prod."

The stranger was on the verge of entering Hobson's grocery store. He looked over his shoulder to see Dave Drake and his men striding toward the blacksmith shop where Moody and Johnny Wade were pounding the ore wagon apart with sledge hammers.

"He looks upset about something," the stranger drawled.

Mordecai stroked the handles of his guns. "He ain't happy, mister—an' that's for sure."

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU MEN DOING?"

Moody and Wade paused in the act of knocking a board loose from the side of the wagon. Drake bulled toward them, shaking his fist. "You got exactly fifteen minutes to put that wagon …"

"You got it wrong, mister," the stranger called out. "You got exactly *one* minute to put those men of yours to work building tables."

Dave Drake could only stare open-jawed as the stranger and Mordecai crossed the street.

"Tables …?" Drake spluttered. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"I'm talking about *tables*—nice, long tables. Those men of yours look capable, and it doesn't seem like they have anything else to do. Now, are you going to ask 'em, or am I?"

Drake swore under his breath and brushed the length of his coat back over the handle of his pistol.

"None of that Mister Drake," Mordecai said. He drew his two Colts and pointed them awkwardly in Drake's general direction.

Drake went crimson with rage. He wasn't worried about the dwarf, his tiny fingers were a long way from the triggers, but if he made a play on him … He shifted his eyes to the stranger. The man's hand was nowhere near his gun, but he knew how quickly he could draw it and how well he could shoot.

"You gonna call—or fold?" the stranger asked quietly.

Drake swallowed his fury and turned abruptly away. "Build the

tables," he snapped. "I'll talk to you men later."

Mordecai's gleeful laughter peeled like a bell. He jammed his pistols back into their holsters and patted the handles with satisfaction.

"We sure showed him, didn't we, mister?"

"No, Mordecai, *you* showed him. You're a two-gun marshal and you showed him just fine."

The stranger walked up the street and Mordecai followed him, running to keep up. He was like a happy dog trotting at his master's heels.

"Who's the best cook in Lago, Mordecai?"

"Well … Mrs. Belding's a fine cook … so is Mrs. Anderson. I guess it depends on what kinda food you like."

"Pies."

Mordecai licked his top lip. "Mrs. Rhoda Hobart. Yes, sir. Mrs. Hobart is the best pie maker in the entire world."

A dozen or more women lined the counter of the Emporium, chattering away like so many birds on a fence. They stopped their gossiping when the stranger walked into the store and moved aside to give him room at the counter.

He touched the brim of his hat. "Afternoon, ladies."

"Good afternoon," Mrs. Bass replied coldly. She had just been telling the other ladies about the bell in her husband's church, and how hard it was on her having all those poor souls from the hotel as lodgers in her house. She turned her back on the stranger and walked out in a huff. If she had expected the others to follow her example she was disappointed. They stayed, eyeing the man in fascination.

Jason Hobart stood behind the counter, his wife by his side. Hobart was a practical and shrewd man. One of the first businessmen to settle in Lago, he had made a modest fortune out of his mercantile store which sold everything that anyone could possibly need, from axes to zithers. The stranger's speech that morning had impressed him, especially the part about them not wanting their shops burned down.

"What can we do for you, mister?" He was all smiles.

The stranger studied the crowded shelves and the racks of clothing, the cans of paint and the stands of tools. "Several things," he said. "But first I'd like to ask your wife a question."

There was a murmur from the women, and then an expectant hush.

"Me?" Rhoda Hobart looked faint.

"Yes, ma'am. I hear you bake good pies."

She stared at him, open-mouthed. "Why, yes. I think I do."

"You're too modest, my dear," her husband said quickly. "Why, she bakes the tastiest pies in the territory."

"What kind?"

"Apple," Rhoda Hobart said. "Apple pie is my specialty. If you'd like an apple pie I'd be happy to bake one for you."

"That's be real nice of you, ma'am, but I don't want you to bake *a* pie, I want you to bake fifty."

"Fifty?" The word echoed from a dozen throats. All of the women looked as shocked as Mrs. Hobart.

"Enough for every grown person in town."

Mrs. Hobart put a hand to her throat in dismay. "But … that would take every tin of apples in Hobson's store—an' just about all the flour and short'nin' as well. And besides, I don't believe I could bake that many. I'm not as young as I used to be."

The stranger made a motion with his hand at the other women. "I'm sure some of these fine ladies would be glad to help."

"Of course we would," Mrs. Caleb Bowen said. "When do you want them?"

"By tomorrow afternoon."

"Is there going to be a party?"

"You might call it that, ma'am. A kind of welcoming party."

The women stared at him in silence.

"I'll need a few other things," he said, turning his attention to the equally bewildered storekeeper. "A dozen bedsheets—sewn together."

"Sewn?" Jason Hobart's voice was hollow.

"Yes, sir, end to end."

He looked at the women and bowed slightly. "Again I'll need the help of you good ladies. Someone who's handy with a needle and thread."

"There's a sewing circle," Hobart said weakly. "I … I guess they could do it for you, but …"

"And paint," he cut in. "As many gallons of red paint as you can come up with."

"Paint?" Hobart said in a hollow voice. "Red paint?"

"And don't forget the brushes. I'll be putting half a dozen men to work."

"Doing what?"

The stranger's smile was cryptic. "Painting."

He leaned against the hitching post in front of the blacksmith's shop

and watched the men hammering the tables into shape. One was already completed and set up in the center of the street, and two more were in the final stages of construction when Jason Hobart came out the side door of the Emporium pushing a delivery cart piled high with cans of paint. He rolled the wagon up to the stranger and then let go of the handles as though glad to be rid of the burden.

"Here's every can of barn paint I got, mister. But I don't see what you need it for. One can would do for them tables."

"We're not going to paint the tables. We're going to paint the town."

Jason Hobart could go along with a joke as well as any man. He searched for a twinkle in the tall man's eye that would give the ribbing away, but he could see nothing but a bottomless darkness.

The paint was red as blood and dripped viscous puddles in the dust as the lids were pried from the cans. Four of the teamsters stood watching, mystified and uneasy.

"What are we supposed to do?" one of them said.

The stranger handed him a can of paint and a wide brush. "Start at the head of the street and work your way down. Paint everything that ain't moving or breathing."

The teamster took the paint reluctantly. "What about the church? You want that painted, too?"

"I said everything."

"I'll do it if you say so, mister, but it's going to look like the main street o' hell when we get through."

"Yes," the stranger said. "I reckon it will at that."

Three women brought the sheets, carrying them folded over their arms like a flag of surrender.

"It sure makes a long piece of goods," one of the women said, "but we did like you wanted—one dozen good cotton sheets sewed end to end."

"Just lay it on the ground, ladies—and thank you kindly."

The women appeared dazed by all the activity that was going on around them. They placed the length of sheeting on the ground and stepped aside, waiting to see what the stranger was going to do next.

"Mordecai!"

The dwarf came running. He had been supervising the building of the tables, strutting up and down the center of the street with his chest puffed out like a pouter pigeon and his hands resting on the ivory butts of his guns. The teamsters had growled at him under their

breath as they sawed and hammered wood, or lugged gallon cans of paint down the street, but they had been careful with their curses. They didn't know what was going on, but one thing was sure—the stranger had the run of the town and Mordecai Fortune was firmly under the stranger's wing.

Mordecai was panting for breath when he reached the stranger's side. "Here I am, mister. What can I do for you?"

The man pointed down at the sheets. "I want that cloth spread out, Mordecai, and I want you to paint something on it. Then, when you're finished painting, I want you to get a couple of men and hang it over the street—down there—one end fixed to the roof of the cafe, and the other to the roof of the feed store. You got that?"

"I … I guess so," the little man stammered.

The stranger's voice was matter-of-fact. "It's simple, Mordecai. I want a banner stretching clear across the street. A long, white banner. Anyone riding toward town is going to be able to see that banner from a long way off."

"I guess they would."

"And do you know what I want painted on it, Mordecai?"

"No, sir. I can't rightly guess."

The stranger moved his hands as though writing across the sky.

"I want, *'welcome home boys,'* in letters three feet high."

Men worked through the long afternoon, sloshing red paint on the raw wood of siding and frame, door and sill, post and rail. The buildings reflected a crimson sun and the dust of the street was splattered with gore. Between the shiny redness of the buildings stretched the white band of sheeting, bisecting the street, hanging limp in the still air, the painted words upon it drying in the heat, cracking in the rays of the sun.

The stranger rode under the banner with a shout, spurring his horse, clutching the reins with one hand. He held a short length of board nailed to a post in his other hand and he waved it at the working men as he rode by. Waved it and shouted. No one could hear his words and no one could see what he had painted on the board in bright red paint.

Up the road at the gallop, dust spraying from the black Morgan's hooves; up the road and across the flats, heading for the rise where the road turned sharply south—the twisted trail through the chaparral that led to Fort Bower and Yellow Springs, Okapa and Carson Forks. At the top of the rise, tilted drunkenly in the sand, stood an arrow-shaped sign with a barely legible word painted on it: LAGO.

The stranger pulled in his horse, bent over and plucked the sign from the earth. In its place he jammed the post with the board nailed to it, pounding it deeply into the ground with the butt of his pistol. The board was of fresh-cut yellow wood and across it, in bright red letters, was a single word …

HELL

Chapter VIII

Dave Drake sat behind his desk in the small, cluttered office of the Drake-Allen Mining Company. He sat stiffly on the edge of his chair staring through the dust-streaked window at the street.

"The man's loco. He's crazy as a wolf. Painting the town! I tell you, he's mad—and we're all mad to let him do it."

Morgan Allen looked up from his ledger books. He sat in the rear of the office, his back to an open safe. "He has a strategy, more than likely."

"Strategy!" Drake spat the word.

Allen adjusted his steel-rimmed spectacles and made an entry in the ledger book with a quill pen. "He seems to be a man who knows what he's doing, strange as it may appear."

Drake slapped his hand against the desk top in anger and frustration.

"Four good wagons stripped to their wheels! That's pretty damn strange, if you ask me. How you gonna enter that in the books, Morgan?"

Allen ignored the sarcasm. "A business expense. Part of the price we pay to bury Stacey."

Drake slumped back in the chair, glaring bitterly at the activity in the street. He hated the stranger more than he had hated any man in his life—and he had hated many. The man's arrogance was almost too much to bear, and the thought of Callie Travers sleeping with him made the blood pound in his head. Anger veiled his eyes and he almost failed to spot the grizzled little man scurrying out of the assay office across the street.

"Zephe Tobin!" He sat upright, instantly alert.

Allen removed his spectacles and dangled them between thumb and forefinger.

"Zephe? Are you sure?"

"Damn right I'm sure. He's runnin' this way like the hounds of hell are after him."

There was the clatter of heavy boots on the steps and then the door to the office burst open and a white-bearded gnome of a man with a face the color of burnt leather stepped into the room. Drake pushed his chair back and started to his feet. Zephe Tobin pointed a gnarled finger at him.

“Don’t get up, Dave. Just crawl across the floor like the snake you are!”

Drake’s smile was a frozen shadow. “Why, Zephe. Good to see you back. Find anything this trip?”

The little man stamped a foot so hard that dust rose from the floorboards. “You’re damn right I found something! But not in the mountains. No, sir … I found plenty right across the street in the assay office. By God, there’s always rats in mines, but you two are the biggest pair I ever see’d!”

Drake leaped to his feet, right hand gripping the handle of his revolver. “You can’t come in here and run off at the mouth. Who the hell do you think you are?”

“A ruined man, you sonofabitch!”

He took a menacing step toward Drake who half drew his gun in response to the threat. Morgan Allen came out from behind his desk, moving quickly for such a big, portly man.

“Hold on you two! None of that.” He positioned himself between the two men and placed a hand on Zephe Tobin’s shoulder.

“Now just calm down, Zephe. What seems to be the matter?”

The old prospector seemed on the verge of spitting in his face.

“What seems to be the matter?” he mimicked. “I’ll tell you what seems to be the matter. You bastards stole my Red Hill claim … and the one at Stone Face, and the two I had at the south wall dig. I trusted you snakes but you jiggered the dates on those papers. You flim-flammed Tom Foley the same way, and by God I’ll see that you go to jail!”

Allen’s smile was smooth as syrup. “Now, Zephe, nobody jiggered you out of any claims, so let’s not have any more talk about jail. It isn’t proper talk, Zephe. Not proper at all.”

Tobin pulled away from Allen’s touch. “Tell that to the government claims inspector when he gets here next week. You tell him that it ain’t proper to slap you in Verde prison!”

Allen frowned, his moonface suddenly sheathed with sweat. “What government claims inspector?”

“The one that’s comin’ from Fort Thatcher … the one that’s been checkin’ claims all over the territory. I hear tell he’s sent a dozen men to prison already—an next week he’ll send two more!”

He spun about and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him with such fury that a pane of glass shattered and tinkled to the floor.

“Makes a lot of noise for a little man, doesn’t he?” The quavering tone of Allen’s voice betrayed his concern.

Drake's laugh was sharp and bitter. "Looks to me like Stacey isn't our biggest worry, Morgan."

Allen ran a shaking hand across his forehead. "Shut up and let me think."

Drake pointed toward the street. "There's the result of *your* thinking, Morgan. A red-painted town and a crazy killer. Our saviour! That's real funny. You think he'll save us from the claims inspector like he's savin' us from Bridges?"

"I said shut up!"

Allen paced the small room, lumbering back and forth between the desks like a caged beast. Finally he stopped, the worried look slipping from his face like clouds from the moon. "A funny thing, Dave, when you think about it."

"Think about what?" He still clenched the handle of his gun and his voice was surly.

"Stacey and the Carlins. They swore they'd burn the town. I suppose they could start with the claims office. All those scraps of paper'd go up like a torch."

A gleam of excitement was in Drake's eyes. "Now you're talking sense. I tell you, Morgan, I can square things with Bridges. Throw that animal a bag of scraps and he'd set fire to his own mother."

"And the gunslinger?" Allen asked softly.

"I'll take care of him—and with the town's blessing. He's gone just a little too far and nobody'll give a damn if he's stopped cold—cold and dead."

Johnny Wade hauled on the rope that dangled from the belfry and the railroad bell cling-clanged its sharp notes across the town. The sound carried well, the Reverend Bass had to admit that much, but every ring made him wince with pain. He had his church bell and there would be few people who would give money to provide for another. His dream of deep-throated bronze sounds pealing like Gabriel's call each Sunday morning was fading like the sunlight.

People came slowly down the street toward the church, walking with their mouths agape, staring at the hideous redness of Lago. The church tower was a scarlet obscenity jutting against the pale sky.

"Evenin', Preacher," Ezra Malkin said sharply as he and his wife reached the open doors of the church. "Should be a right interesting town meeting."

"Yes," Bass muttered. "It should indeed."

Dave Drake had insisted on it, and that was his right as a member of the council. The reverend had a feeling of dread, a heaviness across

his chest. He could sense bitter anger and resentment in most of the people who had come. Tempers were close to the boiling point and he feared for the outcome of the meeting. There were times when emotion took the better of common sense. The shrill voices of argument were already rising inside the church, becoming more voluble with each arrival. When at last the street lay empty, the reverend sighed, squared his thin shoulders and walked into the uproar.

"Meeting will please come to order!"

The reverend slammed his fist against the lectern and glared at the seething crowd. Under ordinary circumstances it was the mayor who presided over town meetings, but that office was somewhat in doubt. Bass glanced at Mordecai Fortune who sat, blithely unconcerned, on the steps leading up to the pulpit. Had the dwarf conducted the meeting only chaos would have ensued.

"Please!" the reverend shouted. "Please come to order and let's get this thing under way."

The shouting died down to a low, angry buzzing.

"That's better. Now, as you all know, Dave Drake called for this meeting to air a complaint, and under the democratic charter of Lago that complaint has to be heard, discussed, and acted upon by the citizens of this town. Now then, I say we all keep quiet and let the proceedings begin. I recognize citizen—and councilman—Mister Dave Drake."

There was a great deal of applause and Drake shot to his feet, an imposing figure of righteousness. "I'll make it sweet and simple," he shouted. "I don't like what's been happening in this town."

The shouts of agreement were deafening and Matthew Bass had to pound the lectern with a psalm book to restore order.

"A stranger rides into our town," Drake continued, "and in twenty-four hours he's changed everything. He's killed three young men, taken over the hotel and painted the entire town the color of the blood on his hands! It couldn't be worse if the devil himself came to Lago."

Caleb Bowen jumped up before the crowd could applaud Drake's words. "Just hold on there a moment, Dave. I say it could be a hell of a lot worse if it was *our* blood that was flyin' around. Sure, he shot three young men, only I wouldn't refer to 'em like that. I'd call 'em three young rattlesnakes! An' as for kickin' everybody out of the hotel, an' paintin' the town, well, that ain't no crime, is it?"

Henry Belding rose from his seat in the first row.

"He's living in sin—right in my hotel—that's a crime, sir. That's a

crime in the eyes of the Almighty!"

"Let's leave God out of this," Titus Anderson shouted. "Beddin' Callie Travers ain't a crime, it's a natural *phee*-nomenon."

Laughter broke the tension of the room and the Reverend Bass pounded for order. "Let's get on with the meeting. Brother Belding, we're not gathered here to discuss the morals of the man, or of Callie Travers either. Brother Drake feels that we don't need the stranger in our midst, that we should send him back to wherever he came from. So let's vote on it."

"I say we send him packin'," Jason Hobart called out in his high, clear voice. "Boot him right down the road—*after* he's taken care of Stacey Bridges!"

Dave Drake sat down slowly. The damn fools, he thought bitterly. So afraid of their own shadows they couldn't think straight. The man could rub their faces in horse dung and they'd rise up smiling, as long as there was trouble on the horizon. He listened grimly to the final vote—an overwhelming mandate for the stranger to stay. So be it. He didn't need their approval. It might have made things easier, but it didn't change a damn thing.

"That ends the meeting," Matthew Bass intoned. "Before you go I'd like to remind everybody that there will be a regular church meeting tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, and I would appreciate all the elders being present—for a change. Thank you … and goodnight."

The crowd filed out of the church onto the dark street. No one paused for further conversation but hurried toward their homes, walking quickly past the ominous buildings.

Dave Drake lit a cigar and waited for Henry Belding to come out. "I'll walk with you, Henry. I reckon you and I are the only sensible men in town."

"Well," Belding murmured. "I can't condone naked sin under my own roof."

"And rightly so." He walked slowly, savoring his cigar. "It sets a bad example, Henry. You got a young, high-spirited wife. It isn't healthy for her to see that kind of goings on. Isn't healthy at all. Why, what if she got ideas like that in her head?"

"She … she's a good women," Belding said thickly. "God-fearing and virtuous."

"Of course she is," said Drake quickly. "Still, you know how women are when there's a good-looking young man around. I don't need to tell you that, Henry. You know how tongues wagged when Marshal Duncan was alive."

Henry Belding came to an abrupt halt, his face turning the color of

the buildings. “That was just filthy gossip! Sarah fixed supper for him, that’s all. Just fixed the man a meal now and then, him bein’ a bachelor.”

“Why, sure, Henry,” said Drake soothingly. “I know that … but from what I hear, she’s fixing supper for this man, too.”

Belding tried to say something, but his mouth couldn’t form the words.

Drake drew on his cigar and blew a thin stream of smoke from the corner of his lips. “Henry,” he said casually, “don’t bother to lock your front doors tonight.”

Belding felt the breath catch in his throat He stared at the ground, unable to look Dave Drake in the eye. “There … won’t be any trouble, will there?” His voice was so low that Drake had to bend forward to hear him.

“No, Henry. You just go about your business and don’t give it a second thought.”

“Yes,” he said, swallowing hard. “It’s better that way. Good evening, Brother Drake.”

Drake’s smile was warm and loose. “And a good evening to you, Brother Belding.”

A light burned in the office when Dave Drake returned. Morgan Allen sat at his desk making an entry in a ledger. Drake frowned when he saw him.

“Did you talk to her?”

Allen waited until he had completed his notation before replying. “Of course. I went up the back way. Nobody saw me.”

“And what did she say?”

“She seemed—agreeable.”

“For how much?”

Allen sighed deeply and looked up for the first time.

“Callie does some things for money, Dave, but she’ll be doing this out of fear. That makes her like everybody else in this town.”

“Fear?” Drake looked dubious. “What’s Callie afraid of?”

Allen adjusted his spectacles and turned back to his ledger book.

“The hangman.”

Callie Travers sat motionless at the dressing table, staring at her image in the mirror. There was no lamp burning in the room and her face looked ghostly pale in the faint light of the moon.

“The bastard!” she whispered vehemently. He had just walked in on her while she was getting dressed. One moment she had been alone in

the room, and the next, he had been standing there, smiling at her, telling her what he wanted done.

And she had no choice. None. Her fingers trembled as she touched the soft outline of her face.

"After they cut you down, Callie, they toss you in a pit and shovel quicklime on your face?"

"Oh, the rotten bastard!"

It had been so long ago. She hadn't forgotten, she would never forget, but she had assumed everyone else had. No one in the town ever talked about Jim Duncan. They had buried him that cold morning on the hill and then wiped the thought of him out of their minds. They had covered his body and tossed his memory to the winds. And now that bastard Allen had dug it all up again and thrown it into her face.

"Guilty as they are, Callie … in the eyes of the law … just as guilty … hang you right along with the others …"

She covered her face with her hands and whimpered her fear. There was no one to comfort her. She thought of that terrible night when she woke to the sound of horses thundering past her house and of the door opening, bursting inward, almost flying from its hinges. Waking to Stacey Bridges standing by her bed, wild-eyed and sweat-soaked.

"Bury this … go on … bury it deep."

He had tossed it at her feet as she got out of bed. Part of it had touched her bare flesh—slimy, limp, like the body of a snake. And she had picked it up because she had been terrified of the look in Stacey's eyes. She had picked it up off the floor, that long coil of plaited thongs, and felt the blood seep from the leather. And she had buried it in the dark, under a cottonwood tree, and when she had gone back into her house Stacey had been waiting for her, naked under the blanket.

"I've been here all night … you hear? All night."

His flesh had been damp, smelling of leather, sour clothing, and blood.

"Oh, my God!"

She couldn't bear the darkness and she stumbled away from the dressing table and searched frantically for a match to light the lamp. The evening wind tossed lace curtains in her face as she felt along the top of a table. Through the open window she could see the street. The stranger was standing there, looking up, his body a tall shadow in the moonlight.

"Where you going?" Henry Belding said. His tone was sharp, filled

with unreasoning suspicion.

Sarah Belding paused at the door and looked at her husband curiously.

"Just out on the porch, Henry. For a breath of air."

"All right," he muttered, looking back at the Bible on his lap. "Don't be too long. I … want to get to bed early."

"Very well, Henry," she said.

Curious, she thought. Her husband had been nervous as a rabbit since coming back from the town meeting. She'd had supper prepared for him, but he'd barely touched it. Just picked at his food and then reached for his Bible. Food for the soul, he called it. She sighed and walked slowly across the dimly lit lobby and out onto the porch.

She didn't see the stranger standing at the top of the steps. She didn't see him until her hand brushed his in the darkness and then she stepped back with a cry of fear.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "Did I frighten you?"

She tried to smile. "I just didn't see you … that's all."

He reached out and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"People are scared mostly by what's in their own heads, not by what they see—or can't see."

She pulled stiffly away from his touch. "I don't have anything to fear."

"No," he said. "Maybe you're the only person in this town with nothing to be afraid of."

"That's nonsense. I know the people here better than you do. They're good, kind, decent people and they never had anything to be fearful of—until you came."

He laughed softly. "You don't say that like you mean it, Sarah. You know why the people are afraid—maybe better than anyone. You just don't want to talk about it."

She turned toward the door, but he stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

"Nobody wants to talk about it, Sarah. They want to pretend it never happened."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice was a whisper.

He pointed toward the street. The moon washed the town with an ivory light and the buildings gleamed.

"Right out there … in the middle of the road. How many people do you think saw it happen, Sarah?"

"Please," she whimpered. "Let me go in."

"Two? A dozen? How many saw the marshal die? How many saw

the men who did it? How many spoke up about what they saw? How many, Sarah?"

"Please …"

He stepped aside and held the door open for her.

"No one, Sarah. No one said a damn thing. That's what the people are afraid of. There's a ghost in this town and it won't go away."

She rushed past him, covering her mouth with the back of her hand to keep from crying out. He watched her go, his face a mask.

Callie Travers raised herself on one elbow and gazed down at the man sleeping beside her. He lay on his back, breathing slowly and deeply. His lean, handsome face looked almost childlike in sleep. She felt an odd pang of regret for what she had to do—what she must do. But he was only a man. There had been others before him and there would be others when he was gone. She looked quickly away and slipped out of bed, moving with the silent grace of a cat. She stood by the side of the bed for a minute, watching the man, but he did not stir. She wondered if she should take his pistol but decided against it. The gunbelt was hooked to the brass bedpost near the man's head and she was afraid to touch it. The heavy gun might swing against the post and wake him. Anyway, Morgan Allen hadn't told her to take the gun. She was simply to unlock the door and get out of the way.

She dressed quickly and tiptoed across the room to where a heavy chair stood braced against the door. It seemed to take forever to move the chair without making a noise, but finally it was done and the door unlocked. She gave one final glance at the sleeping man then slipped out into the dark hall. She did not close the door behind her.

Dave Drake stood at the end of the hall with four of his teamsters. They were young men, strong as the mules they drove. They led hard lives, lives of dust and desert, blazing sun and bad water. They lived by the crack of the whip and the jolting of the wagons. They lived hard and drank hard, and counted only their own kind as friends. They'd take Morgan Allen's pay, but they'd walk through hell for Dave Drake. They'd tear an ore wagon to pieces and hammer the boards into tables for Dave Drake. They'd paint a town red for Dave Drake. They'd even kill a man for him—if that was what he wanted them to do.

They stood beside him in the darkness, hands clutching the short, lead-filled clubs they carried on the wagons, the clubs that were used to put a mule out of its misery if it broke a leg or floundered helplessly in a pool of quicksand. The clubs were as deadly as bullets, and cheaper. Freighting ore across the high plains was a narrow profit

operation.

Callie Travers came quickly down the hall, carrying her shoes, her bare feet making a soft, slapping sound on the wood floor. She slipped by the men without looking at them or saying anything and disappeared from sight down the black well of the staircase.

Dave Drake looked at the faces of the men beside him. Good faces, he thought proudly. Good men. Masters and Rule, Gribbin and Bisby. Men who knew what to do. He made a slight motion with his hand toward the partially open door and they moved forward, silent as smoke.

Moonlight filtered through the window and fell on the dark, blanket-curled shape on the bed. Drake walked slowly into the room, grinning at the sight. He felt a moment of wild triumph. The bastard was asleep and would never know what hit him. A pity. Maybe they should wake him up. He signaled to the other men and they slipped into the room, raising their murderous clubs as they closed in on the bed.

“Welcome to Lago, you sonofabitch!”

Drake’s harsh whisper was punctuated by the bone-crushing swing of his club. The others swung at the same time, the clubs a blur of movement as they ripped into the still form on the bed.

Chapter IX

He lay stretched out on the porch roof below the window of his room, a dark, shirtless figure with a Colt .45 stuck in the waistband of his pants. He held the stub of a burning cigar in his left hand and a stick of dynamite in his right. He could hear the crashing of the clubs as they hit the bed and he touched the tip of the cigar to the short fuse and tossed the spluttering, waxen stick through the open window.

"What the hell …!"

Dave Drake stepped backward, his brain whirling in confusion. There was no blood on the bed, no crushed and broken body, just flying feathers as pillows burst from the blanket folds.

"Goddamn!"

He looked around wildly. Something flashed by his head—a thin streak of orange fire. Something hit the bedpost and rolled into a corner of the room, hissing and smoking …

"Dynamite!" Jack Masters screamed it as he dropped his club. The men raced for the door and there was a clawing, grunting scramble to get through it. Only Drake, Jack Masters, and Johnny Rule made it into the hall.

He rolled like a barrel down the slanted roof, twisting his body as he reached the edge. He landed feet first and was across the street, running in a half crouch when the front of the hotel blew out in a stab of yellow flame and a crack of thunder. Wood, glass, and twisted fragments of the bed sprayed into the street along with the crumpled forms of two men. The dead teamsters hit the buckled roof of the porch and slid into the road.

A shock wave pushed Morgan Allen against the side of the building. He stood in an alleyway across from the hotel, waiting with a horse and wagon for Drake and the men to bring out the body of the stranger. The blast stunned him and he dropped the reins of the horse and threw his hands up to protect his face. The horse bolted in terror down the alley, the light wagon bouncing and rattling behind it.

Screams sliced the night: Callie Travers, shrieking in fear. She ran out of the hotel into the street and Morgan Allen came toward her, stumbling like a drunk.

"Callie … what …?"

Then he saw the stranger, a rigid figure standing by the porticoed front of Titus Anderson's shop, shirtless and barefoot eyes fixed on the

smoke billowing from the shattered upper stories of the hotel. Rage tore at him like some savage beast and he tugged at the small pistol at his side.

"Bastard! Rotten bastard!"

He had the gun out and shooting, jerking the trigger, the bullets smashing into the barber pole ten feet behind the man. He took a step closer, holding the gun carefully with both hands, determined not to miss. He was still sighting along the barrel when flame spat from the stranger's hand and slugs kicked him off his feet and into bloody death.

The stranger moved out of the shadows toward the front steps of the hotel, his Colt level with the doorway. Tendrils of acrid smoke drifted down the stairwell, filling the lobby. He could see men stumbling across it, choking in the gray cloud as they headed for the front door.

Callie screamed and tried to hurl herself on the stranger, her fingers hooking for the gun in his hand. He saw her coming out of the corner of his eye and stepped back, lashing out with the flat of his free hand and sending her flying into the dust.

Dave Drake heard her scream of warning and jumped to one side of the door. "In the street," he yelled. "Get the sonofabitch!"

Johnny Rule and Jack Masters burst through the doorway, firing as they came, shooting wildly at every shadow. The stranger aimed calmly for the gunflashes. He had four bullets in the cylinder and no extras in his pocket. He thumbed the hammer and dropped Jack Masters in front of the door. Johnny Rule ran the length of the porch, slapping shots over the rail. The stranger tracked him, letting the hammer fall twice, and Johnny Rule fell in a long, sliding sprawl, the gun flying from his lifeless hand.

Dave Drake took one blind shot through the glass panel of the hotel door and then bolted through the smoke haze toward the back. Henry Belding blundered out of his apartment and nearly collided with him, but Drake shoved him violently aside in his wild flight for the rear door.

"My hotel!" Belding howled in anguish. "You promised …!"

Drake had no time for explanation or apology. He ran with the fear of death clutching at his spine, down a short, dark hall to a bolted door. He emptied his gun at the lock, blowing the door outward, then plunged into the alley behind the hotel.

His chestnut mare bucked and reared at the post where he had tied her, its mouth foaming blood against the bit. He calmed the frenzied animal as well as he could before untying the knotted reins and swinging up on the saddle, the horse at the gallop before he had both feet in the stirrups. He tried to hold it in, turn its head, but his grip on

the reins was loose and unsure. The horse sought the safety of its stall and cut down the alley toward the main street and the livery stable.

The stranger heard the galloping horse before he saw it. He swung his gun toward the sound just as the horse, with Drake clinging desperately to its neck, bolted into the moonlit street in a plume of dust. Drake caught a glimpse of him and struggled to control the horse, pulling sharply on one rein to turn the mare's head away from the stable and send it racing down the center of the street. He lay flat along its back like a Comanche, his heels stabbing the mare's flanks. The buildings thinned … the funeral parlor … the church … beyond lay the desolate land …

One bullet. The stranger aimed carefully at the retreating rider, adjusting his lead and elevation for the speed and distance of the target. He teased the hammer back and let it slip from under the ball of his thumb. A slug screamed down range but the rider didn't fall.

"Christ!"

The pain almost jerked him from the saddle. He dug his left hand into the horse's mane as his right arm flopped uselessly, dangling from a bullet shattered elbow. The desert lay ahead, cool and placid under the wide sky.

"Make it," he groaned. But make it to where?

The stranger watched the dust trail of the galloping horse until it faded from sight, then shoved the Colt into the waistband of his pants and looked around him. Smoke had stopped drifting from the hotel. There had been no fire but the upper two floors and the roof were twisted ruins. Henry Belding stood on the porch waving his arms in despair while Sarah tried to comfort him.

Titus Anderson slipped out of the shadows, clutching a ragged bathrobe to his skinny frame. His eyes darted back and forth from the bodies in the street to the wreck of the hotel. "Christ Almighty, what's going on?"

"Nothing," the stranger said. "Somebody left the door open and the wrong dogs came home for the night."

"My God … my God." The barber kept repeating the words like a litany. Other men were hurrying out of the darkness, groggy with sleep. One or two carried lanterns and a beam of light fell on the bloody face of Morgan Allen.

"What happened here?" Caleb Bowen's voice was high pitched with fear.

"A misunderstanding," the stranger replied. "Better get your wagon and a few men with shovels."

Bowen was looking around him, shining his lantern in all directions. His lips moved soundlessly as he counted the dark, huddled shapes in the street and on the porch.

"Five! My God … five men."

"That's what it comes to," the stranger said matter-of-factly. He could have been confirming the tally of a pack of mules. "You've got a night's work ahead of you."

"Yes, sir," Bowen said slowly. "An' that's a fact."

Henry Belding came down the steps from the porch, Sarah following him, trying to hold him back. She wore a long white cotton robe and her dark hair hung in loose folds to her shoulders. The stranger kept his eyes on her, ignoring the chalk-faced hotel keeper.

"My hotel!" Belding wailed. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I should leave. It isn't a fit place to stay."

"You bast—" Belding choked back the word, swallowing his outrage.

The stranger regarded him with icy contempt. "Those are your friends, mister. Better grab a shovel and help bury 'em."

All anger and courage drained from Henry Belding like blood from a wound. He stood in the center of the street in his long gray underwear, his face hollow with guilt and fear. He started toward Caleb Bowen when Sarah Belding rushed forward and took hold of his arm, her cheeks flushed, her eyes blazing.

"No! You're coming back to bed, Henry. That … that man can't tell you what to do."

"Leave me be, Sarah," Belding whispered. "Leave me be."

He pulled away from her grasp and walked slowly over to the small group of men who were forming around the undertaker.

"How dare you!" Sarah breathed. She stood rigidly before him, a defiant woman meeting him eye to eye.

"It's his choice," the stranger said. "It isn't Christian to leave dead men lying in the street."

"Men *you* killed," she said hotly.

"Men who came to kill me, Sarah." He took hold of her arm, his fingers a tight band, digging into her flesh. "But it's the middle of the night. I want to go back to bed."

She laughed hollowly and tossed her head in the direction of the hotel. "There isn't a room left that's decent enough to sleep in."

His fingers dug deeper. "Except yours."

Her eyes lost their look of defiance. She stared at him in stunned disbelief. "No. No …"

“Yes, Sarah.” He took a step toward the porch steps, pulling her along with him.

“No. Please. Don’t do that. I’m a married woman.”

But she was coming with him. She wasn’t straining to break from his grasp. He moved with certainty now and she followed beside him, only her head twisting from side to side, looking from him to her husband like a trapped animal.

“Henry!”

Henry Belding watched his wife move up the steps and across the porch, the stranger walking beside her, holding on to her arm.

“Henry!”

She was calling to him from the lobby, but he made no move to leave Bowen, Ezra Malkin, and Titus Anderson. They were watching him curiously, waiting for him to do something.

“Henry!” A final call from the dim recesses of the lobby—then the slamming of a door.

He clenched his fists and stared at the sky. His eyes felt hot and dry, tearless. The stars moved in their courses. It was so written in the Book of Judges. There was nothing he could do.

Caleb Bowen broke the awful silence. “Let’s go get the wagon and the gear. Let’s get on with the buryin’.”

Mordecai Fortune waddled slowly toward the hotel from the darkness of the livery stable. His heavy pistols banged against his knees as he walked and he had to hitch them up, the way a woman might hitch her skirt to keep the hem out of the mud. Bowen and the other men passed him, their lanterns casting bright spots of yellow on the dark ground. They paid him no attention. He wasn’t wanted, nor needed for the task before them.

The body of Morgan Allen made him pause.

“Good evenin’, Mister Big Man,” he murmured before continuing on to the hotel steps. A light burned in the ground floor apartment of the Beldings. He watched the light for a long moment and smiled when it went out. He had seen Sarah Belding and the stranger go into the hotel, and he had seen Henry Belding walk away. The sight had pleased him without his knowing why. It just seemed … proper. He sat on the bottom step and rested his humped shoulders against a post. It was quiet on the street now, the silence of the dead, but there could be men lurking in the shadows. Mordecai ran a hand across the badge on his chest then tugged one of the pistols out of its holster, pulled back the hammer and rested the gun across his knee.

Her body was cool under the cotton robe. He slipped it from her

shoulders and let it fall at her feet so that she stood like ivory before him. He kissed her and her mouth was warm, open.

Sarah

The name was a sigh coming from a great distance. He kissed her again and moved his hands slowly across the silken smoothness of her back.

Sarah

Her body arched under the gentle touch of strong fingers and she felt herself falling, drifting downward into a warm blackness. She closed her eyes and let herself fall, knowing that he would be with her.

Sarah

She groaned at the sweet pain and turned her head on the pillow. A man was smiling at her, tall and sandy haired, smiling in the sun.

Sarah

A whisper on the wind. An echo out of the dark land.

Dawn slashed the eastern sky, touching the ragged tips of the mountains. Mordecai Fortune trembled slightly in the morning chill and hugged his knees. The dead were a long time gone, carried away in Caleb Bowen's wagon by silent men. Nothing had moved in the street since except a dog, skirting the places where the dead had lain, hair bristling along its back and its tail tucked between its legs.

"Mordecai!"

The dwarf looked quickly over his shoulder. The stranger stood in the doorway, bare of chest and foot.

"I need clothes and gear, Mordecai."

"Yes, sir." Mordecai got stiffly to his feet and holstered his gun.

"You left the hammer cocked," the stranger said.

The little man flushed in embarrassment and eased the hammer down, using both hands to do so. "I ain't used to a gun yet."

"You'll learn." The stranger walked slowly down the steps into the street. He sensed the stirring of a curtain behind him and he knew that if he turned around he would see her face at the window, pale and lovely. He steeled himself not to look.

"I need everything from boots to a carbine."

Mordecai tugged thoughtfully at his ear.

"Mister Brown and Mister Hobart went grave digging with the others. I reckon that when they get back …"

"I'll be gone," the stranger cut in.

"Gone?" He looked shaken.

"For a while, Mordecai. Just for a while."

He walked quickly away from the hotel, the dwarf running to keep up with him.

Titus Anderson leaned against his shovel and ran a hand across his sweaty face. Five holes had been dug and five bodies tumbled into them without benefit of coffin—without benefit of any kind.

"Shouldn't somebody get Preacher Bass?"

"What for?" Caleb Bowen said wearily. He picked up a shovelful of loose earth and dropped it in one of the pits. "There wasn't a God-fearin' man among 'em."

"Or mark the graves?"

Ezra Malkin smoothed a mound of dirt with the back of his shovel.

"Hell, I can't remember who we put where."

Anderson shrugged in resignation. "Well … reckon it don't matter none. When a man's dead, he's dead. I don't suppose he gives a damn if you pray over him or mark his resting place."

"That's a fact, Titus," Bowen said. "An' not all the dead are in the ground. Look at Henry. He's starin' into that grave like he wanted to crawl on down and cover himself up."

The men looked across the gravesite to where Henry Belding stood bent over his shovel, a shrunken, ludicrous figure in dirt-caked longjohns and a ragged jacket borrowed from Asa Goodwin.

Caleb Bowen spat into an open grave. "I tell you, there's more than one way to kill a man."

"He should'a stopped him," Ezra Malkin said stoutly. "For his own self-respect."

Anderson sighed deeply and jabbed his shovel into the dirt. "Ol' Henry's no different from the rest of us, Ezra. There ain't nothing a man won't put up with if it means saving his hide. Nothing."

The men lowered their eyes and turned away. There was nothing further to be said. The graves yawned and they filled them, tight-lipped and grim.

The sun rose, a disc of copper, burning off the haze. The sun struck the red-painted buildings of Lago and made the weary men in the wagon gasp in awe. Asa Goodwin stopped the horses and stared along with everyone else. Red. Yes, they knew the town was red, and yet … seeing it this way … from a distance … fresh as blood in the early morning. They all shuddered, filled with dread.

"Welcome home, boys," Asa Goodwin said quietly.

"What'd you say?" Bowen snapped.

“I was readin’ the sign. You can sure see that sign a long way.”

“Just get the team movin’,” the undertaker said. “We all got a day ahead of us. Yes, sir. A hell of a day.”

Goodwin slapped the reins and the horses trudged forward as though they, too, were loathe to go any closer to the town.

“Somebody comin’,” Goodwin said, stopping the horses again. “Like a bat out of hell.”

They could all see him, a black rider on a black horse, coming down the road from Lago at a flat gallop.

“It’s him,” Belding said tightly. He clenched the handle of his shovel until his knuckles turned white. “Maybe he’s goin’ away.”

“Going somewhere,” said Jason Hobart, squinting at the sight. “And wearin’ my stock, by God. Those clothes are from my store!”

The stranger passed them, his horse spraying dust from its flashing hooves. He was dressed in black, from his shiny boots to his broad hat. A new Winchester .33 jutted from the saddle boot.

“That’s my gun!” Thaddeus Brown shouted.

But the rider was a long way past. The men stood in the back of the wagon and watched him until he could no longer be seen and the dust from his horse drifted into nothingness.

Chapter X

They rode with the dawn in their faces, through the mesquite thickets beyond Carson Forks and into a country of sandy waste and twisted arroyos. They paced the stolen mounts well, and by the time the sun burned above the horizon the horses were tired but not worn down to the hoof.

"We'll stop here," Stacey Bridges said as he reined in his mount.

An arroyo snaked northeastward, its sandy floor flecked with green. The horses sensed water and sniffed the wind.

"Walk 'em a spell," Bridges said, dismounting. "We won't get no fresh ones this side of Lago."

Cole Carlin pointed up the arroyo. "That gulley leads to the Lago road, Stace. Remember? Two years ago … when that bastard Duncan was hot after us … we hid out there."

Bridges frowned. There were arroyos all around them, trailing away toward all points of the compass. "You sure that's the one, Cole?"

"Stake my soul on it, or my horse. Whichever you like, Stace."

Bridges spat in his palms and rubbed the wetness across his brow. "I'll take your horse any damn day in the week. But I don't know. Don't look like the same one to me."

"It is," Cole said. "Look at the horses, they know. Hell, that's the only gulley with any water in it within a hundred miles. Remember, Stace? Remember the water?"

"God damn," Dan Carlin said. "I remember, Cole. We had to dig for it … about two feet down … came bubblin' up, black as dead meat but sweet as hell."

Bridges nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right, Cole. Sure. It had all them little spots of salt grass." He grinned broadly. "Why, that'll save us ten, twenty miles."

"More," Cole said. "It'll save us fifty."

They hobbled the horses and let them nuzzle the water. It oozed from a hole they had dug in the sand with the butts of their pistols and their bare hands. The men had drunk their fill and now the animals slurped at the leavings. It would be enough to keep them alive as far as Lago. There would be no need for them after that.

"I'm going to take the mayor's horse—that big gelding of his," Bridges said. He lolled in the sparse shade of a boulder, his voice

slurred by the murderous heat. “Cut it right off from that damn hearse of his an’ ride the bastard to death.”

Cole Carlin tossed a pebble at a horned toad. He missed and the toad scampered for safety under a rock.

“Hell, I’ll take ol’ Drake’s chestnut. That’s a right good mare.”

“For a bar-be-cue,” Bridges said.

Dan Carlin laughed so hard he rolled off his haunches onto the hot sand. He stood up, still laughing, then stopped abruptly, a bewildered expression on his face.

“It ain’t possible,” he said. “Damned if it is.”

“What the hell you babblin’ about, Dan?” Bridges asked idly.

The big man pointed up the arroyo. “Drake’s chestnut. It’s comin’ down the trail, Stace. Big as life. And ol’ Drake’s clingin’ to her back.”

They watched in silence as he slid from the horse and tumbled to the ground. Their eyes flicked over him with the compassion of snakes.

“That’s a right bad arm, Dave,” Bridges said.

Drake staggered to his feet and leaned back against an outcrop of rock. He held out his shattered arm for them to see.

“Do something!”

Bridges laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant sound. “Hell, we’re doin’ something, Dave. We’re watchin’ you bleed to death.”

Drake closed his eyes for a moment, struggling for control. “For God’s sake, Stacey. Help me.”

Bridges squatted down in the sun, scooped up a handful of pebbles and tossed them one by one at Dave Drake’s boots.

“Help you? We’ll help you like you helped us. You helped us to one year of breakin’ rocks and bein’ treated like dogs. A year that was rightfully yours. Yours and Morg Allen’s. Well, by God, you’re goin’ to pay for it.”

“Listen to me, Stacey,” Drake cried desperately. “Things in Lago have changed … you don’t understand … but you need me.”

“No, Dave. You need us. I don’t know what’s happened in Lago, but by the looks of that arm you’ve worn out your welcome—and maybe ours, too.”

Drake groaned in pain. “Christ, Stace, what’s the point of all this? Set my arm and then we’ll talk … work out a deal.”

Bridges smirked and glanced at the Carlins. “You boys hear that? Ol’ Dave is going to work out a deal.”

“A year’s back pay,” Dan Carlin said. “That’s what he owes us, Stace.”

"No, Dan," Bridges said ominously. "He owes us more than that. Don't you, Dave?"

"Whatever you want, Stacey," Drake said through gritted teeth.

Bridges winked at Cole Carlin who sat on a rock, whittling at a manzanita branch. "Whatever we want. How about that, Cole?"

"Sounds right fair, Stace." He squinted critically at the piece of wood in his hand. He had shaved it down to a sharp shaft, like a featherless arrow.

"Oh," Bridges said with biting sarcasm, "Drake's always been fair. He's just about the fairest man I know—'ceptin' for me. Now, Dave, we don't want one penny more than our due. You just give me the combination of that big, black safe in your office and we'll sneak into town, take what you owe us and leave all the rest—or bring it back to you here. What do you say, Dave?"

Drake summoned the last of his strength. He wanted to spit into Bridge's mocking face but the man was too far from him and his mouth was too dry.

"I say … go to hell … you worthless sonofabitch."

Bridges stood up, his mouth a thin line, like a knife cut across his face.

"Teach him some manners, Cole."

Cole grinned as he slipped his whittling knife into his pocket. He walked slowly over to Dave Drake and jabbed the pointed end of the stick into the side of his neck.

"You pay attention to what Stacey's sayin'. You hear?"

"I want the combination, Dave," Bridges said firmly.

"I wouldn't give you the combination to the gates of hell!"

Bridges made a chopping gesture with his hand and Cole Carlin leaned his weight on the stick, driving it deep, into the side of the neck and out the throat. Drake made a choked, gurgling sound and went down on empty legs, his life's blood soaking into the dry ground.

Cole stared in amazement. "He sure had a lot of blood left in him."

"That's all he had to give us," Bridges said. "Hell, we didn't need the sonofabitch. A coupl'a sticks of dynamite'll take care of that safe. We'll bust it open like a tin box."

He stepped over to Drake and kicked sand into the dead man's face.

The tracks had been clear and he had picked them up less than a mile outside of town—broken chapparal beside the road and a dollop of dried blood on a flat stone. The stranger had followed, cutting across the shrub-studded land toward the foothills. The trail was as clear as a

map: blood, horse droppings, hoof prints in virgin sand. He could have followed it with his eyes shut. When he reached the mouth of an arroyo he paused to think out his next move. The tracks led into the arroyo, but the way was tortuous, a twisted maze of tumbled boulders and outcrops of jagged rock. A lone man, even a man with a bad arm, could hold off a troop of cavalry in such a place. He took the high trail toward the rim of the arroyo, urging his mount up the steep sides.

He spotted the horses first—three dun-colored cow ponies and a chestnut mare, muzzle-deep in a water hole. He dismounted quickly, led the Morgan behind a clump of wind-twisted manzanita and fastened the reins to a branch. Opening the flap on his saddle bag he took out five sticks of dynamite which he stuck into his belt, and two boxes of .33 shells which he emptied into his pockets. He slipped the new Winchester from the saddle boot, cranked a shell into the breach and made his way back to the rim.

He had a clear view from behind a tumbled bastion of rocks. Dave Drake lay dead on the ground, staring at the sky, while Stacey Bridges and the Carlin brothers stood idly by.

The stranger kneeled behind a rock and wedged the rifle against his shoulder. He took careful aim, held his breath, and squeezed off a round.

The bullet tore the heel off of Dan Carlin's left boot and the big man sprawled to the ground, bug-eyed with shock. The sound of the rifle reverberated against the walls of the arroyo, and before the sound faded away all of the men had squirmed behind cover.

"You hit, Dan?" Cole Carlin shouted.

"Damn near tore my foot off," Dan said as he examined his nerve-stunned leg for signs of blood. "Who the hell was that?"

Bridges peered around the side of a boulder. "Don't know. Maybe that bastard Allen." He drew his pistol and cocked it. "Cole, hop out an' draw his fire. I can't spot the son of a bitch."

Cole jumped out from his hiding place and zigzagged toward the opposite side of the arroyo. A single shot from the rim nicked his shirt as he dove for safety.

"Did you spot it, Stace?"

"Yeah," Stacey said. "He's up behind them red rocks. Wish to hell I had me a carbine."

He rested the barrel of his Colt on the top of the boulder and aimed for the distant rocks where a thin haze of gunsmoke still lingered in the still air.

The stranger smiled faintly and removed a dynamite stick from his belt. He wedged it firmly into a cleft in the rocks and lit the coiled

fuse with a match. Then he crawled back out of sight and ran a dozen yards along the rim of the arroyo to another outcropping of wind-eroded sandstone. He reached his new position just as Stacey Bridges fired three slow, careful shots. He could see spurts of dust fly into the air at the spot he had just left, and then the low wall of rocks erupted in a blinding flash. Smoke and thick plumes of red dust burst upward and chunks of rock went hurtling down into the narrow canyon below.

"God A'mighty!" Cole Carlin screamed in shock as rocks the size of his head bounced and tumbled around him. Drake's mare galloped off, whinnying in terror, and the three hobbled ponies stumbled and lurched in their panic. "What the hell did I hit?" Bridges yelled.

Dan Carlin stepped cautiously away from the side of the canyon where he had pressed himself. "Maybe he killed himself, Stace."

The bang of a rifle and the howl of the slug answered the question for him. He dove for the sand and rolled to the boulder where Bridges was hiding.

"He's up there," Dan said. "Damn him to hell. You think it's Morgan?"

"Maybe," Bridges said grimly. He cupped a hand to his mouth. "Morgan! Hey, Morgan! Is that you?"

There was no answer, only the fading echo of his words.

He shouted louder, a note of whining desperation entering his voice. "Allen! Damn it, Allen, come on down … let's talk it out. Dave was a goner … he was good as dead. We—we just put him out of his misery."

"Misery … misery … misery …"

"He ain't goin' to answer you, Stace."

Bridges wiped sweat from his eyes. "Then he'll die. I swear it Dan. I'll kill the rotten sonofabitch. I'll blow his guts out!"

He jumped away from the boulder and snap-fired five shots at the rim.

"Let the bastard have it Cole … Dan … flush him out!"

Dan shot blindly from behind the boulder, but Cole stepped out into the open and fired with slow deliberation at every cleft in the rocks where he thought a man might be hiding. He was thumbing back the hammer for his last shot when a rifle cracked far above him and a bullet whip-snapped past his head, catching the tip of his ear and slicing it into bloody shreds.

Cole screamed and dropped his gun. "My ear! He shot my ear off!" Blood ran in dusty streams down the side of his face. He clenched a hand to his ear and sank dazedly to his knees. "My ear! My ear!"

"Shut up!" Bridges yelled. "He could've shot your goddamn head

off!"

Bridges quivered with rage. Ducking back behind the boulder he reloaded his pistol, his fingers trembling so badly that he had trouble slipping in the bullets.

"I'll kill you," he screamed. "You up there! I'll cut your filthy heart out!"

"… heart out … heart out …"

The echo mocked him.

The stranger slipped from behind the rocks and ran in a crouch to where he had tied his horse. Before mounting, he took the four remaining sticks of dynamite from his belt and braided the fuses together. Then he jerked the reins free, swung into the saddle and coaxed the horse up the narrow path between the rocks until he was silhouetted against the sky.

"There he is!" Dan Carlin shouted. "Up there!" He fired a shot but the bullet hit the rocks far below the rider.

"You missed!" Bridges howled. "Damn it to hell!" He shoved a final bullet into the cylinder of his Colt and opened fire just as the man turned his horse away and dropped from sight below the ridge line. Something had fallen from his hand and it came rolling down the steep side of the arroyo, bouncing off the rocks.

Bridges stared at it. "What the—"

The explosion blew him off his feet. The dynamite shattered the rocks and hurled fragments high into the air to fall like a punishing rain on the men below.

Bridges was the first to struggle to his feet. His face streamed blood from a dozen cuts and his ears rang like a thousand bells. Thick smoke drifted in the wind, sulphurous as the smoke of hell.

"I'll kill him," he screamed. "Kill him!"

He began to run toward the smoke but Dan Carlin grabbed him and held him back.

"Don't go up there, Stace."

Bridges struggled to get loose, but the big man was too strong for him.

"That bastard was toyin' with us," he raged. "Just playin' games! Well, I'll give him games. I'll butcher him!"

"I … I couldn't see who it was, Stace."

Bridges shook his head groggily, spittle foaming at the corner of his mouth.

"I'll find him. I swear to God I'll find him. I'll get him if I have to

kill every sonofabitch in Lago!"

The street was crowded. Men and women stood in small groups, talking in hushed, frightened tones. The death of Morgan Allen and the midnight flight of Dave Drake were on everybody's lips—those and the stranger's sudden disappearance from the scene.

"He'll be back," Mordecai had been saying all morning. Few had shared his conviction and so it was with a sense of triumph that Mordecai passed the word of the stranger's return. "He's comin'," he shouted, running up the street. "I can see him … he's comin'… told you he'd be back. I told you."

When the stranger rode past the church Mordecai was waiting for him, standing in the center of the street, both hands resting on the handles of his guns, his badge shiny in the sun.

"Afternoon, Mordecai," the stranger said, reining in his horse.

The dwarf grinned. "Knew you'd be comin' back like you promised."

"And bringing the guests with me, Mordecai. The party's about to begin."

Mordecai gripped his guns a little tighter so as to hide the sudden shaking of his hands.

"I … I don't see their dust, mister."

The man glanced idly over his shoulder. "You won't see it for a spell maybe. But they're in back of me. You people better get ready. A nice little welcome home picnic for your wandering boys."

The dwarf spun on his tiny heels and ran off, shouting, passing the word. His voice was a thin clarion call, but his words struck everyone like the slash of a steel whip.

"Get ready! They're comin'. Everybody get ready!"

The stranger's smile was thin and cold as he slid down from the saddle and walked his horse slowly up the street.

"Do you hear that Sarah?" Henry Belding parted the curtains in the bedroom and peered out of the window. "Mordecai's across the way. He's saying—"

"I can hear him," Sarah interrupted coldly. She sat at her dressing table running a comb idly through her long hair. "He's telling everybody to get ready. Are you ready, Henry?"

He turned his back to the window and looked at his wife. It was past noon and she still wasn't dressed. She'd been seated in front of her mirror for hours, just staring at herself, not saying anything until now.

"Ready?" he said. "No … not quite ready, Sarah. Some of us are going over to the church … to say a few words to our Maker—pray for the outcome of this day. I would like you to come with me, Sarah."

She shook her head fiercely. "No, Henry. Not now … not ever. You, and all the men like you, all the *good* men in this town, we don't pray to the same God."

"You don't know what you're saying."

She dropped her comb on the floor and turned to face him.

"I do, Henry. Yes. I know what I'm saying. You all hid a murder behind your prayers. Did you ever tell your Maker about Jim Duncan? Did you, Henry? Did you tell him how you didn't raise a finger when he was dying in the street?!"

"That's enough!" Belding's face was waxen. "What we did or didn't do was for the good of the town. We had to keep the peace. We couldn't afford to get mixed up in that business. Well, by God, we've lived with it and there have been times when it wasn't easy, Sarah … not easy for any of us … but that's the price we had to pay."

Her laughter was bitter. "Price? What *is* the price for a human life? Tell me, Henry? How much does it cost?"

He stumbled past her and out of the room.

Wind ruffled the sign. WELCOME HOME BOYS. Old Mrs. Lake glanced at it and then continued toward the picnic tables, a hamper of fried chicken in her hands. She had discussed the sign with Mrs. Malkin many times. *"Strategy,"* Mrs. Malkin had said, echoing her husband's words. *"Stace and the Carlins won't know what's happening. The sign and all the folks eatin' in the street will set 'em at ease."* The explanation had been scant comfort and she hurried toward the tables with a feeling of dread. It seemed to be a feeling everyone shared. The tables were crowded with people, all staring at the apple pies Mrs. Hobart and the other ladies had baked, at the fried chicken, the fresh baked rolls and the tall pitchers of lemonade, but no one was saying anything. There was no sound on the street at all, only the flap of the sign and the crunch of boots as men walked grimly toward the top of the street with guns in their hands.

The stranger stood beside his horse, watching the preparations with a critical eye. Johnny Wade was in the church tower along with Caleb Bowen and Titus Anderson. Pete Moody was behind the fence with the little assayer, Calvin Morton, and Thaddeus Brown. The overturned wagon in front of the blacksmith shop had been reduced to a pile of axles and wheels, but the barricade of hay bales had been extended into the street from Malkin's feed store and six men stood behind it,

their shotguns and rifles resting on the bales. All of the men looked gaunt with apprehension.

"Looks like we're ready," Mordecai Fortune said cheerfully. He waddled across the street from the barricade and stood grinning up at the stranger.

"Sure looks that way, Mordecai," the stranger said quietly.

The dwarf waved a hand toward the church. "Soon as Johnny sees their dust he'll ring the bell. Are you gonna stand here to give the signal?"

"No," the stranger said.

Mordecai scowled. "No? Where are you gonna stand, then?"

The stranger put a foot in the stirrup and swung onto his horse.

"I won't be standing anywhere."

"But … the signal. How you gonna give the signal?"

The stranger looked down at the dwarf for a long moment.

"I'm not giving the signal, Mordecai. You are."

Chapter XI

Mordecai Fortune started to laugh, a high-pitched squealing that verged on the hysterical. The men behind the barricade and the people at the picnic tables stared at him, the sound shaking their already slim resolve. The dwarf was screeching and the stranger was riding slowly away. It was too much for Henry Belding. He grabbed his shotgun and stepped out from behind the hay bales.

"Where are you going?" he said, his voice quivering. "What are we supposed to do?"

The stranger eased his horse toward him.

"You have a gun, mister. Use it."

Belding's arm twitched and the barrel of the shotgun rose and fell. The stranger was no more than six feet away from him. It would have been easy to raise the gun and shoot him out of the saddle, blast the superior, knowing look from his face. But he couldn't raise the gun. He could do nothing at all but drop his eyes and stare at the ground. He felt foolish and alone standing in the street. He felt naked.

CLANG … CLANG … CLANG …

The sound of the bell rooted everyone to the spot. For a second not a soul could so much as breathe and there was no sound but the insane clanging of the bell and the soft plod of the stranger's horse as he moved past the tables and up the long street.

"They're comin'!" Johnny Wade shouted from the belfry tower. "I can see their dust!"

They were coming—a long way out on the flatlands—three rising plumes of red dust streaming in the wind.

"Wait a minute!" Henry Belding shouted. But the stranger was gone.

" 'Hell'!" Stacey Bridges shouted the word like a curse. He cut his horse close to the blood red sign, slipped a foot from the stirrup and kicked savagely at the sign until it toppled into the dust. " 'Hell'! I'll give 'em hell all right. By God I'll give 'em all the hell they want!" He dug his heels into the horse's flanks and whipped it into a dead gallop with the end of the reins. Dan and Cole Carlin pressed close to him in a three-horse race down the road toward town.

Mordecai had never felt so small. He stood in the middle of the street with everyone staring at him, wondering why he was there and what

he was going to do. He removed his hat and held it above his head. That was what the stranger had done—held his hat high above his head before giving the signal to fire. Somehow it had seemed more important and meaningful when he had done it.

"When I drop my hat and shout 'fire,' everybody starts in shooting." His voice sounded smaller than his body. His voice was a tin whistle.

No one in the church tower heard Mordecai. Johnny Wade was staring round-eyed at the dust trails streaking down the road. He could barely see the black dots in the center of the dust that were horses and men. He would never have believed that horses could travel so fast. Caleb Bowen and Titus Anderson huddled beside him, their sweat-soaked palms slipping on the walnut stocks of their rifles.

The men behind the fence could see nothing, but they could hear—not the sound of Mordecai's voice, but the distant thunder of hooves. Thaddeus Brown closed his eyes and leaned heavily against one of the boards. The beautiful new shotgun he was holding slipped from his grasp and clattered at his feet. Pete Moody pushed a shell into the breach of his gun and snapped it closed with an air of grim finality. He glanced at Calvin Morton, but the little gray-haired assayer was staring at the loose board in front of him, his face a mask of terror.

They were coming. Really coming. The townspeople seated at the picnic tables could see the dust now—and the men, bent low in their saddles. Nothing was slowing them, not the gaudy banner slapping in the wind or the ominous sight of the red-painted buildings of Lago. They could hear ragged cries, the hideous whoop of rebel yells above the hammering of the horses' hooves.

They were coming.

They were coming. And there was no one to stop them except a dwarf in the road and some poor fools shaking behind the barricades. A few people seated at the tables stood up quickly, one of them knocking over a pitcher of lemonade. The glass shattered and the liquid streamed across the table and dripped to the ground.

Coming—swift as the clouds racing the sun—the riders fanning out now—Stacey Bridges in the lead, leaning over his saddle, leveling his gun toward the belfry tower.

Mordecai Fortune watched them come. Closer … ever closer. They were at the dead line, level with the church. He dropped his hand, waving his hat.

"Fi—fi—fi—FIRE!"

His voice was a wisp of straw in a hurricane of sound.

"FIRE … FIRE … FIRE!"

He screamed until he thought his lungs would shatter with the effort. He screamed until the tears ran scalding down his cheeks. There was no answer from the barricade of hay. No answer from the belfry or the fence. Stacey Bridges and the Carlin brothers were in the town and their guns were spitting death.

Johnny Wade took a bullet in the shoulder and spun back against the bell. Caleb Bowen shrank in terror below the parapet and Titus Anderson died on his feet with an uncocked rifle in his hands.

"FIRE … FIRE … FIRE."

Calvin Morton threw his shotgun down and ran screaming as bullets splintered through the fence. Thaddeus Brown caught a slug in the chest and fell forward against the loose board into the street. Pete Moody kicked away the board in front of him and tried to fire his gun at the blur of horses and men streaking past his position, but his finger refused to move. It was frozen on the trigger. He caught a brief glimpse of Cole Carlin's grinning face and then he was falling backward as a bullet hammered into him.

"Run, you bastards! Run!"

Stacey Bridges leaped his horse over a crowded table and fired blindly at the crowd. Screams mingled with the sharp crack of the .45. He saw Sam Shaw seated at the end of a table, looking at him, eyes glassy with shock. He leveled his gun at the ashen face and pulled the trigger.

"Die, you sonofabitch!"

And then it was over. Before Sam Shaw's body slipped sideways into the dust. Over. The people running for their homes. A table loaded with food crashed onto its side and Dan Carlin galloped his horse through the mess. Over. The men behind the hay bales tossing their rifles and shotguns into the street and racing for the safety of the feed store.

But there was no safety.

"Get the bastards!" Bridges shrieked. "Get 'em!" He turned his horse sharply and rode down the wooden sidewalk, firing the last of his bullets at any target he could find. People fell screaming under his horse and he grinned to see their bodies roll over and over, kicked by iron-shod hooves into the road.

"Get 'em! Get 'em!"

Dan Carlin rode into the feed store, crashing his horse through the flimsy wall. Men cowered behind bales of hay and barrels of oats.

"Out in the street, you sonsofbitches," Dan yelled, waving his gun.

There was a row of kerosene lanterns on a shelf and he fired at them. Two of them exploded into flame, the burning kerosene splattering across the room.

Dan Carlin screamed with joy as he turned his horse and rode out of the billowing smoke. The men who had been hiding ran after him like rabbits burnt out of their holes.

It was over. The sun sank below the distant mountains, a bloody, smoke-hazed disc. Smoke and flame boiled up from one side of Lago's street. The feed store was a gutted ruin and the flames raced through the shop next to it and licked at the roof of Anderson's tonsorial parlor. Smoke and drifting ashes cloaked the town like a mantle for the dead.

Smoke came wafting over the double doors of the Silver Dollar saloon—a fine, acrid mist. Stacey Bridges inhaled it with satisfaction. He stood with his back to the bar, Cole Carlin beside him. The room was crowded with the battered survivors of the afternoon. A few were seated at the tables, their haunted eyes fixed in space, but most lay or sat on the ground, nursing bloody wounds or whimpering in exhaustion.

Bridges waved a bottle of whiskey. "Look at 'em. The good folk of Lago." He drained the bottle and threw it at Joe Hatch who stood silently behind the bar. Joe ducked and the bottle smashed the mirror behind his head.

"Get me another bottle," Bridges said. "And be quick about it or I'll blow your guts out." His voice was without anger. The whiskey felt good in him and the sight of his cringing townsmen was a tonic, a feast to the eyes.

"A party," he said. "They were giving us a welcome home party. That was pretty damn decent of 'em, wasn't it, Cole?"

Cole wiped whiskey from his mouth with the back of his hand and tossed his own empty bottle at the huddled figure of Caleb Bowen.

"You're damn right it was decent," he said. "But this is a better party, Stace. This is the best damn party I've ever been to. Damned if it ain't."

Hatch brought the fresh bottle of whiskey and Bridges snatched it out of his hand, snapped the neck on the edge of the bar and poured a thin stream of whiskey into his open mouth.

"Good whiskey an' good friends." His voice was slurred and his eyes were small, red dots, like the eyes of a rabid fox.

"Where the hell's the dwarf?" He searched the crowded room, smiling crookedly when he spotted Mordecai. "Come here, little man.

Come on out an' let's get a good look at you."

Mordecai hesitated, then rose slowly to his feet and walked toward the bar. He had lost his hat and his face was streaked with dirt and blood. But he still wore his badge and his heavy guns.

Bridges clucked his tongue in mock approval. "My, my. But ain't you a sight, Mordecai. A marshal. Look at that, Cole, look at the runty marshal. Ain't he somethin'?"

"Sure is," Cole said.

Bridges wiggled his finger. "Step a little closer, Mordecai."

Mordecai took a hesitant step forward. His gunbelts had slipped and the tips of the holsters dragged on the floor.

"You come to arrest us, Marshal?" Bridges said.

"No … no," Mordecai whispered.

Bridges lashed out with his free hand and sent the dwarf reeling to the floor.

"You forgot all your manners, little man," Bridges shouted. "You say, 'sir' when you speak to me. You say, 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir'. You got that, Mordecai?"

"Yes … sir," Mordecai said quickly. His tiny hands wavered above the ivory handles of his guns. It was only a wild dream that he could draw them, a dream that turned to ashes as he thought about it. He pressed his face to the floor and wept.

"I found her, Stace."

Dan Carlin bulled his way through the swinging doors pulling Callie Travers after him. She was hysterical, her clothes so badly ripped that her naked breasts showed through the torn cloth.

"She was hidin' behind her house, Stace—but I drag her out."

He shoved her forward and she fell weeping at Bridges' feet, her hands reaching for his boots.

"Oh, Stace, thank God you're here. I was so—"

Bridges placed the toe of his boot against her forehead and shoved her away.

"Bitch. Stay right where you belong, crawlin' on the floor."

"Stacey!" she wailed, her face twisted with fear.

"Don't 'Stacey' me, goddamn it! I heard all about you beddin' down with Dave Drake while I was away."

"It's a lie," she sobbed. "I swear it, Stace, it ain't true."

"Only ol' Stace in your life. Ain't that so, Callie?"

"Yes," she said eagerly, brushing tears from her eyes. "Yes. I swear

it."

He took a swig of whiskey and then dropped the bottle in front of Callie. It burst showering the cringing girl with glass and whiskey.

"I'm goin' to pay back your loyalty," he whispered harshly. "I'm goin' to let you live—about a half hour longer than the others. You and me, and Dan, and Cole. We'll all have a little fun before you die."

She backed away, whimpering, crawling toward the tables like a whipped dog.

"We need dynamite," Bridges snapped. "Cole, go on up to the mining office and get some sticks. We'll blow these rats to hell an then bust the safe."

Cole grinned and ran for the door. "Don't kill none of 'em till I get back, Stace!"

"There's enough to go 'round," Bridges said. "But we'll wait on you, Cole. We'll surely wait on you."

The light blinded him as he ran out the door. Titus Anderson's shop was roaring upward, the wind whipping the flames into great curling tongues of fire. Cole watched the fire for a moment before stepping off the sidewalk into the street. He was watching the way the flames danced toward the black sky and never saw the whip curl out of the flickering shadows. The twenty-foot bullwhip tore at his body with the force of a shotgun blast. It ripped his flesh to the bone and jerked a tortured scream from his lips. He raised a hand to protect his face and the whip whistled at him again, snapping both of his wrists as though his bones were made of glass. He fell heavily to the ground, his mouth open in one long, unending shriek of pain and terror.

The sound cut through the saloon like a cold wind.

"What the hell …" Dan Carlin drew his gun and started forward, but Bridges stopped him.

"Don't go out there." He drew his own gun and pointed it at the door. He was tensed, ready for anything, and when a black shape sailed over the top of the swinging doors he fired at it. The object landed at his feet leaving a smear of blood on the floor.

Dan Carlin looked at the coiled whip in horror, but Bridges kicked it across the room.

"Let's get out of here!"

They herded ten people ahead of them, driving them out into the street like frightened sheep. Callie Travers was among them, as were Henry Belding and Caleb Bowen, but Mordecai Fortune they left behind, huddled on the floor, weeping silently against the rough wood.

"I don't see him," Dan Carlin said tensely. He was looking up and

down the street. He was looking everywhere but at the whip-torn body of his brother.

Bridges shook his head grimly. “Whoever did it has to be somewhere.” He prodded Henry Belding in the back. “Keep walking—all of you people. The first one to run gets a slug in his spine.”

They walked in a tight group toward the rail where the horses were tethered, the light from the burning buildings throwing their shadows up the street in wavering, distorted patterns. They had almost reached the tethered horses when a dot of light sparkled in the air, sailing down at them from the darkness of the hotel porch. A rifle blazed from the shadows and the dot of light exploded above their heads, spraying them with burning kerosene and shattered glass.

Dan Carlin yelped as a piece of the exploded lantern struck him on the back. He fired three shots toward the porch and raced for his horse, shoving screaming people out of his way.

Bridges clubbed Henry Belding away from him and raked the dark line of the porch with five shots. He thought he saw a dark shadow jump from the edge of the porch and head for the Emporium across the way. He aimed for it and pulled the trigger, but the bullet slapped on an empty round.

“Damn!” He knelt quickly and began to reload.

“To hell with him!” Dan Carlin shouted. He had untied the horses and was leading them away from the rail. “Come on, Stace. Let’s get out of here!”

Let me do it. God, please let me do it. Mordecai Fortune lay under the swinging doors of the saloon and he could see Dan Carlin leading the two horses toward the kneeling figure of Stacey Bridges. He had pulled one of the big Colts out of its holster and was holding it in both hands—one hand around the grip and the other under the trigger guard. The hammer was back and he had his child-thin fingers on the trigger. *Please … please … please …* He pressed tightly and the gun thundered in his hands, almost flying out of his grip. Smoke stung his eyes and he could see through his tears that he hadn’t hit anything. Dan Carlin was still on his feet and Stacey Bridges on his knees, but the horses were gone, racing up the street, trailing their reins.

“You goddamn fool!” Bridges shrieked.

Dan Carlin looked shaken. The bullet had creased his shoulder and he touched the raw spot gingerly.

“I’ll fetch ’em back, Stace—after I get the bastard who shot at me.”

“Just get the horses!” Bridges snarled. His gun was loaded now and he rose tensely to his feet, eyes probing the long, dark mass of the

Emporium. The fire was reflected in the windows and made spotting difficult. But the sonofabitch was over there—somewhere. He started to run, and then the firing began behind him!

Dan Carlin was hit by the first three shots and staggered over to a watering trough to die with his face in the thick green water. Three more shots came from the direction of Titus Anderson's blazing shop, coming so quickly they sounded to Bridges like one shot, but he could feel the deadly breath of the slugs as they whined past his head. He whirled about and fired blindly toward the flames. Then he was running, screaming, shooting at every flickering shadow.

"Come on out, you sonofabitch! Come on!"

There was no answer, only the sharp crackling of the fire.

Bridges stopped. Someone—or something—was moving toward him out of the billowing smoke. A form took shape and then he saw him—a tall, dark-clothed man, sharply outlined against the flames.

"Who are you?" His voice seemed to come from a long way off. "Who are you?"

The figure said nothing and made no further move. It just stood there—watching—waiting.

"All right, you sonofabitch!" Bridges fired, working his run as quickly as he could thumb the hammer. "Die!"

But the figure remained, a stark outline against the orange flames. Bridges turned to run and the figure stepped toward him—shooting—shooting—shooting. Stacey Bridges fell forward into the dusty road, the bullets kicking his body in the slow tumble of death.

Dawn was a smudge of black haze from the dying fire. Caleb Bowen and Asa Goodwin had hitched up the shiny, black hearse. They sat dazedly on the sidewalk staring at the horses in the traces, wondering what to do next.

"We better get started, Asa."

"I reckon so," Asa Goodwin said, not making a move to get up.

Mordecai Fortune walked toward them, the rising sun glinting off his badge. He stood beside Bowen and looked up the street. The stranger sat his horse in front of the livery stable.

The stranger shifted his hat so that the brim fell low across his eyes. He would be riding eastward, into the rising sun. He looked over at the hotel as Sarah Belding came down the steps carrying a carpet bag in each hand. She placed her luggage in a buckboard and climbed up on the seat without a backward glance at her husband who stood like a shadow in the doorway. The stranger raised a hand to her in a gesture of farewell and put spurs to his horse.

Mordecai Fortune watched him leave. He walked out into the street and stood under the scorched banner, watching until the last trace of dust faded from his sight. The morning wind caught the banner and whipped it from the fire-charred ropes, whirling it out across the prairie.

WELCOME HOME BOYS
WELCOME HOME
WELCOME

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERNEST TIDYMAN is a novelist, screenwriter, and motion picture and television producer. His books include *Flower Power*, *Absolute Zero* and HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER, but he is most famous as the originator of the John Shaft series, which includes *Shaft, Shaft's Big Score* and *Shaft Has a Ball.* His screenplays include *Shaft, Shaft's Big Score* and *The French Connection.* He makes films through Ernest Tidyman Productions with headquarters in Los Angeles and writes from his home in Connecticut, where he lives with his wife.